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EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS' NARRATIVES OF POVERTY IN EARLY  
CHILDHOOD

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Signed declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree. The thesis cites a journal article I have authored that is published in SAGE Research Methods.

Signature: .....

## Summary

This thesis focuses on Early Years Practitioners who are working with young children and families in early years provision in England. Adopting a narrative approach the study sought to explore how their understandings of poverty in early childhood are shaped by dominant discourses of poverty and professional and personal experiences. Poverty as a concept is multi-dimensional and dynamic including both the experience of poverty as well as absolute and relative understandings. Under the New Labour Government, Early Years Practitioners were positioned as part of a long-term strategy to alleviate child poverty. Successive government policies have resulted in cuts to early years funding under austerity measures and an increasing focus on children and families with the greatest need. Early Years Practitioners hold a contradictory position, being part of a strategy to address poverty in early childhood, whilst at the same, time being part of a workforce which is to a large extent highly gendered, low status and low paid.

The research was conducted as a case study in two integrated settings consisting of a maintained nursery school, children's centre and daycare provision in the south-east of England during November 2015 to June 2016. Although the settings were in areas of overall relative affluence, they both served areas of deprivation. Therefore, Early Years Practitioners were working with children and families on low incomes. Thirty-eight Early Years Practitioners took part in focus groups to explore how narratives of poverty might be shaped by dominant discourses of poverty and sixteen Early Years Practitioners took part in follow-up interviews to explore how narratives of poverty might be shaped by their personal and professional experiences. The 'subject' of the case was the Early Years Practitioners and the analysis and theorisation of their narratives of poverty the 'object'. Foucault's concept of regimes of truth was used to explore how Early Years Practitioners' understandings of poverty might be shaped by dominant policy discourses. The concept of 'small stories' was used to explore how Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty are co-constructed within interaction, and understandings of how they position themselves in relation to 'other' were explored through I-positions. Five participants took part in a final presentation and discussion of the initial findings, providing an opportunity to comment on and contribute to the analysis of the data.

The complexity of the interconnections between morality, motherhood (and fatherhood) to some extent supports the findings of previous research which suggests that Early Years Practitioners have embodied neoliberal ideology serving to individualise poverty. For example, moral distinctions were made between those who work and those who do not work, reflecting historical discourse of the deserving and underserving poor. Nevertheless, participants' understandings of poverty in this study were broader, more nuanced and at times contradictory. For example, personal experiences of poverty, although rare, revealed the shame and stigma of poverty and served to challenge discourses of an underclass. Dominant policy discourses of 'work pays' were also challenged by references to limited job opportunities, low pay and high childcare costs. Overall the study highlights the need for Early Years Practitioners to be reflexive about both discourses of poverty and the potential influence of personal and professional experiences in relation to poverty in early childhood, suggesting the importance of early years training and professional development. If Early Years Practitioners are to be part of a strategy to alleviate poverty in early childhood then English government policy also needs to recognise the impact of structural inequality and how this challenges those Early Years Practitioners who are supporting young children and families in poverty.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction and context**

#### **1.1 Research focus**

This thesis discusses the findings of a qualitative narrative study which set out to explore how poverty in early childhood is understood by Early Years Practitioners working in two maintained nursery schools and children's centres with onsite daycare provision in the south-east of England. The two sites are referred to as Meadowland and Forestside. The term 'Early Years Practitioner' is used generically throughout the thesis to refer to someone who works within an early years provision, providing education and care for children aged between 0-5 years. The term also includes family outreach workers and family support workers who have been employed by children's centres to support families as part of the government strategy to reduce inequalities (DfE, 2013a). Overall, 38 Early Years Practitioners took part in the study. Data were collected using focus group interviews and individual semi-structured interviews. Drawing on Thomas (2013a), a case study approach was used where the 'case' was understood as both the subject (the unit of research) and the object (the analytical or theoretical framework). In this research, the Early Years Practitioners were the object and how narratives of poverty in early childhood were analysed and theorised was the subject.

There is limited research in England about how Early Years Practitioners understand poverty in relation to their everyday work with children and families<sup>1</sup>. Simpson (2013) argues that government policy about poverty in early childhood is pervaded by neoliberal ideology reflected in a tendency to offer individualised causes of poverty (such as inadequate parenting) rather than recognising structural explanations (such as low pay). The present study sought to contribute new understandings to the sparse existing literature by exploring how Early Years Practitioners' understandings of poverty might be shaped by professional and personal experiences and dominant discourses of poverty. This introductory chapter introduces the key concepts of the study and provides a context for early years provision and Early Years Practitioners.

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<sup>1</sup> The research strategy for the literature review is included in Appendix 1.

## **1.2 Understanding of poverty**

Within this study, poverty is understood as a social construction shaped by political discourse – dynamic, multi-dimensional and intersectional. It is conceptualised in terms of how it is experienced relative to society, as well as a recognition of a universal absolute core, the minimum needed to sustain life (Lister, 2004). Drawing principally on the ideas of Townsend (1979), Levitas (1998) and Lister (2015), how poverty is experienced is understood in relation to discourse, such as discourses of redistribution, work and an underclass.

## **1.3 Early years provision**

In England, 93% of all children receive early childhood education and care (ECEC), with approximately 60% of parents<sup>2</sup> paying for additional childcare on top of their free entitlement (DfE, 2017c). Historically, childcare for young children was largely informal, for example, Rutter and the Family Childcare Trust (2017) state that up until 1990 there were only 59,000 childcare places available in England and Wales, compared to 1.1 million places in 2017. The introduction of free early years provision reflects increased rates of maternal employment over the last twenty years and the demand for more affordable childcare (Rutter and the Family Childcare Trust, 2017). For children in England, there is a wide range of formal ECEC provision available. One of the largest providers of ECEC is schools, with every school with a reception class delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage<sup>3</sup> for four to five year olds and, in 20% of cases, providing provision for younger children (DfE, 2017c). However, the majority of ECEC is provided by a range of private, voluntary or independent provisions, including day nurseries, pre-schools, sessional creches and childminders, with many offering hours that cater for the working day and all year round availability (Rutter and the Family Childcare Trust, 2017).

Moss (2006) discusses how a number of countries including England have attempted to move towards an integrated approach to early years provision. For example, Nordic countries, have fully integrated services from birth to school providing a ‘universal

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, the term ‘parent’ is used to refer to someone who takes care of a child, regardless of their gender or biological relationship to the child, therefore, the definition includes mothers, fathers and other adults who might have primary caring responsibilities (Leverett, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> The Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017a) was introduced in 2008 providing a curriculum for children aged birth to five years.

entitlement to services for children from 12 months of age' (Moss, 2006, p. 32). In England, Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) were set up in 1997 in areas of disadvantage, offering a range of integrated services including health, early learning and family support (DCSF, 2008). These were followed in 2002 by the development of Sure Start children's centres, initially provided in the poorest 30% of neighbourhoods (Sammons et al., 2015). The core purpose was to 'improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers' (DfE, 2013a, p.7). In 2004 the introduction of the 'Choice for parents, the best start for children' (HM Treasury, 2004) marked a change in Sure Start policy, it was no longer aimed solely at areas of deprivation, instead the focus shifted to providing a Sure Start children's centre in every community with a range of parenting support services and access to childcare. The change in policy was supported by findings from the EPPE<sup>4</sup> study (Sylva, et al., 2004) which found that children from lower income families had better outcomes in settings with a mix of social backgrounds.

Lewis (2011) highlights how engaging parents was central to the ethos of children's centres and most interventions were focused on the parent and child, rather than the child alone. For example, part of children's centres' core purpose was focused on improving parents' 'aspirations and parenting skills' (DfE, 2013a, p.7). Gillies (2005) highlights how the policy discourse around Sure Start, although not explicitly stated, was pervaded by class distinctions, for example, working-class parents were positioned as lacking in parenting skills and moral responsibility and in need of parenting support whilst middle-class parenting practices were normalised as 'good parenting' and associated with prosperity. Vincent et al. (2010, p. 127) highlights how working-class mothers are particularly vulnerable to labels of 'not good enough' or 'bad mother' associated with 'judgements of "improper" moral behaviour and inadequate norms of care for and interaction with children'. Gillies (2005, p. 840) argues that a focus on parenting practices constructed working-class parents as destined to 'reproduce their poverty' and rendered material and financial inequalities invisible. Clarke (2006, p. 712) suggests that although, on the one hand, children's centres were promoting 'good

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<sup>4</sup> The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) was a longitudinal study which investigated the attainment and development of children between the ages of three to seven years (Sylva et al., 2004).

parenting’ they also provided effective surveillance particularly of mothers, for example, targets associated with ensuring that all new parents were seen within two months of the birth of their child, ‘regardless of their wishes’. More recently, in Sammons et al.’s (2015) report on the ‘Impact of Children’s Centres’ the term ‘mother’ appeared 369 times and the term father appeared only three times, suggesting that the policy of children’s centres continues to be overwhelmingly focused on mothers. As Gillies (2005) points out, although the term ‘parent’ suggests a gender-neutral practice, in reality women spend more time caring for children and are more likely to be targeted in early years approaches and government policy.

In 2011, the Coalition Government shifted the focus of children’s centres from universal services to targeted services for families in the greatest need of early intervention (DfE, 2013a). Baldock et al. (2013) suggest the change in policy reflected a time of austerity and cuts to both public services and local authority budgets. A report commissioned by the Sutton Trust (Smith et al., 2018) state that the number of children’s centres has declined significantly since 2009. Although government figures have recorded a 14% drop in centre numbers, Smith et al. (2018) argue that realistically the figure is likely to be nearer 30%, due to a confusion over what local authorities ‘count’ as a children’s centre. Sammons et al. (2015) suggest that reductions in services and staffing together with the restructuring of children’s centres has led to lower outcomes for children. Smith et al. (2018, p. 37) conclude that, due to cuts in funding and services, Sure Start Children’s Centres can no longer be perceived as a ‘truly “national programme” as there is so much local variation in what is now provided’.

Maintained nursery schools are funded by the local authority and have operated in conjunction with Sure Start children’s centres in England and Wales to provide high quality education and integrated services for children under five, their families and other local providers (Early Education, 2014). Practice is led by specialist head teachers and delivered by teachers with Qualified Teacher Status and nursery nurses. They are concentrated in areas of deprivation, with 64% being in the 30% most deprived areas in England (Early Education, 2015). Evidence from Ofsted<sup>5</sup> ratings for pupil progress

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<sup>5</sup> Ofsted, is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. They inspect and regulate services that care and provide educational services for children and young people (Ofsted, nd).



and schools' tracking data suggest that maintained nursery schools have been successful in closing the gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers (Early Education, 2015). However, similar to Sure Start children's centres, maintained nursery schools are also 'struggling to survive'— since 1980 a third have closed and approximately 400 remain (Early Education, 2015, p. 2). Austerity measures together with additional costs associated with requirements to employ a head teacher and qualified teachers threaten their continuation (Early Education, 2015, p. 3).

#### **1.4 Locating the study**

The study took place in Meadowland and Forestside, two maintained nursery schools and Sure Start children's centres with onsite daycare provision in the south-east of England. The maintained nursery schools provided education for children aged three and four years and were open term time only, providing 15 hours free childcare for children. In addition, the nursery school received the Early Years Pupil Premium<sup>6</sup> for those children who met the government's criteria for 'disadvantaged three and four year-old pupils' (ESFA, 2018). The daycare was open for 50 weeks of the year and provided education and care for children under the age of three. The provision also received government funding to offer free early years education for two-year-olds whose parents were in receipt of certain benefits (Gibb et al., 2011). The daycare provision offered care and education for children aged three and four years, which parents could pay for in addition to their free entitlement. The children's centres offered a range of support groups and educational courses for families, such as managing money, health, housing, as well as working directly with families offering support and advice. The south-east is a predominantly affluent area of England and offers some of the highest skilled and paid jobs and above average rates of home ownership (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a). The percentage of children in relative poverty (below 60% of the median income after housing costs) varies widely across the south-east of England, ranging from 11% to 32% (End Child Poverty, 2014). Forestside and Meadowland were located in two of the 30% most disadvantaged areas in England (HCEC, 2013). Although both settings served areas of overall low disadvantage, 'The English Indices of Deprivation' (DCLG, 2015) suggests that Forestside was located in

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<sup>6</sup> The Early Years Pupil Premium was introduced by the government in April 2015 to help early years providers try to close the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged children and their peers (Early Education, nd, p. 2)

a more affluent area than Meadowland.

### **1.5 Researcher positionality**

The study adopted a qualitative narrative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty in early childhood are shaped by dominant discourses and the professional and personal. As discussed more fully in Chapter Three, researcher positionality and reflexivity were important in how I constructed myself in relation to my participants and how I re-constructed their narratives. I am a Senior Lecturer in a university in the south-east of England and teach on a range of undergraduate courses and modules relating to Early Childhood. The study developed out of my interest in teaching a module about child poverty to a group of Early Years Practitioners who were completing a foundation degree<sup>7</sup>. I was interested in how they engaged with the topic, especially how they understood poverty in wider and local contexts. For many, their starting point was global understandings of poverty and expressing sympathy for children experiencing absolute poverty 'elsewhere'. For example, some reminisced about the 'Live Aid' concert in 1985, organised by Bob Geldolf to raise money for children starving in Africa whilst others cited more recent examples of poverty in other countries. As we looked at relative understandings of poverty we discussed our professional experiences of working in early years settings in England. Although children living in low-income households has remained high (DWP, 2018), some students questioned whether poverty existed in the UK, drawing on examples from their professional experience or stories in the media. The most striking moments were when we looked at how child poverty was measured using a threshold of households below 60% of the current median income (Life Chances Act 2010 [2016]<sup>8</sup>). Some practitioners were surprised that, according to the government measure, they were living in poverty themselves. One student strongly resisted the label saying that she did not see herself as being in poverty and would never apply for benefits. I was interested in the tensions experienced by the Early Years Practitioners, for example, how students seemed to distance themselves from the poverty they encountered in their professional roles despite many experiencing in-work poverty

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<sup>7</sup> Foundation degrees were introduced in the UK in 2001, a combined academic and vocational qualification in higher education, equivalent to two thirds of an honours bachelor's degree.

<sup>8</sup> The Life Chances Act 2010 [2016] was formerly known as the Child Poverty Act 2010 and was renamed following changes introduced by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

themselves. I was interested in exploring more fully how Early Years Practitioners understood poverty in early childhood particularly within my professional role of developing students' skills and knowledge. Much has changed in the UK since I started the thesis reflecting the temporal nature of poverty, for example, the introduction of government policies, such as Universal Credit and the rise in emergency provision for those in poverty, such as food banks.

### **1.6 A narrative approach**

A narrative approach was ideally suited as a way of considering how the Early Years Practitioners' discourses of poverty in early childhood were related to their professional and personal experiences and understandings of self and other. Andrews (2014, p. 8) states that a narrative approach is a way of exploring the complexity of how the 'other' is constructed, for example,

how and what one perceives and understands about one's own life is invariably connected to one's view of others. Who am I (and who are 'us') invariably invites the question of who are 'they' (or other), just as the reverse is true.

Employing a narrative approach enabled the study to build on Simpson's (2013) research to explore how Early Years Practitioners' understandings of poverty in early childhood are shaped by the professional and the personal.

Small stories (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008), I-positions (Buitelaar, 2006) and Foucault's (1977[1980]) concepts of power and truth are used to explore how Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty might (dis)connect with dominant discourses. These are introduced in the next section, together with a rationale of why these approaches were chosen. In contrast to 'big story research' which 'analyses stories as representations of world and identities', small stories are conceptualised as 'interactive engagements' where people 'construct a sense of who they are', enabling a focus on how characters and the narrator are positioned and how the 'self' (or narrator) is positioned with regard to dominant discourses (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 385). In addition, 'Small stories' enable an exploration of how understandings of poverty are socially constructed in time and space through the narratives that Early Years Practitioners might tell. This approach was chosen because 'small stories' are a way of addressing both the local context, the 'doing' of the narrative, as well as the wider context, how Early Years Practitioners' narratives might be shaped by dominant discourses of poverty in early childhood.

Buitelaar (2006) employs the concept of the ‘dialogical self’ and how individuals speak and shift between different I-positions as a way of exploring intersectionality. This approach afforded a way of exploring the intersection between Early Years Practitioners’ personal and professional lives and how these connect to discourses of poverty. In line with an emic approach to intersectionality, categories of difference were not predetermined or relationships of power assumed (Tatli and Ozbilgin (2012). Instead categories emerged from the intersectionality identified within the data and Early Years Practitioners’ use of I-positions.

Foucault’s (1977[1980], p. 131) concept of truth and power affords that, ‘each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true’. For example, neoliberalism, a political move away from ‘welfare provision towards privatisation and deregulation’ (Jones, 2015, p. 28), is arguably a prominent regime of truth within UK politics embodied within dominant discourses of poverty. This concept was appropriate as a way of understanding how Early Years Practitioners’ narratives connected to broader understandings of poverty within society.

## **1.7 Discourses of Early Years Practitioners**

The next three sections provide a context about how Early Years Practitioners have been positioned professionally with reference to policy discourses of the ‘substitute mother’, ‘technician’ and the ‘new agent’. The discourses draw on the work of Moss (2006) and Osgood (2006a; 2006b) and examine how Early Years Practitioners’ have been positioned within a predominantly low status and gendered workforce. Osgood’s (2006a; 2006b) discourse of the ‘new agent’, is explored in terms of how it re-positions the Early Years Practitioner and challenges other discourses.

### **1.7.1 Discourse of the ‘substitute mother’**

Historically, Early Years Practitioners have been almost exclusively female workers on low pay and working in poor conditions (for example, Payler and Locke, 2013; McGillivray, 2008; Miller, 2008; Osgood, 2006a; 2006b). This trend has persisted with government figures indicating that 98% of the early years workforce is female (DfE, 2014a). According to the Low Pay Commission (2016), the numbers of early years workers on the national minimum wage is 84.4%, suggesting that Early Years

Practitioners are vulnerable to in-work poverty, particularly in areas such as the south-east of England where housing costs are high (Lloyds Bank, 2017). Moss (2006) argues that a highly gendered and classed workforce on low pay reflects a historic discourse of a 'substitute mother', where the only requirement to work with young children is that of 'maternal instinct'. As explained by Osgood (2005), the discourse is based on the premise that the mother's natural instinct is to look after her children and childcare is therefore an extension of this role, suggesting that being an Early Years Practitioner is an unskilled job performed by women. She suggests that rather than valuing early childhood education and care as a 'feminised practice', it is presented as a low status or 'default' career. In a later paper, she argues that the importance of 'emotion' is fundamental to the work of the Early Years Practitioner, for example, 'practitioners make considerable personal and collective investments in contributing to and achieving a culture of care characterised by affectivity, altruism, self-sacrifice and conscientiousness', however, this work is unrecognised within government policy (Osgood, 2006b, p. 8). For example, Nutbrown (2012a, p. 9) states that 'early years courses are often the easiest to enrol on and the courses that the students with the poorest academic records are sometimes steered towards.'

Osgood (2005) argues that social class together with gender has legitimised a low status and poorly paid workforce within a climate of neoliberalism. Under New Labour's policy of 'welfare to work' childcare was recognised as a way of encouraging women back to work, however, 'within this discourse is the implication that childcare is not 'real' work but a mechanism to enable others to participate in careers that are afforded status, prestige and relative wealth' (Osgood, 2005, p. 290). Under a discourse of neoliberalism and individualisation, Early Years Practitioners have been subject to raising the 'profile and status of childcare through personal motivation and commitment', thereby obscuring structural factors, such as low pay, poor working conditions and low status (Osgood, 2009, p. 738). McGillivray (2008) suggests there is a further tension between the role of the mother and the role of the Early Years Practitioner, for example, if an ECEC workforce consists predominantly of women, some who are mothers, then who cares for the child of a mother who goes to work? As Miller (2012, p. 40) points out mothers 'have increasingly been expected to combine caring and paid work', whilst at the same time continuing to be the main carer in the home. They are also subject to normative middle-class gendered constructs of the 'good' mother, one who is selfless and available to meet their children's needs (Miller,

2012). Osgood (2009, p. 737) argues that government policy does not address how an Early Years Practitioner who is also a mother, achieves a work-life balance and accesses affordable childcare for her own children. She describes this as the ‘gender loop’, whereby, mothers were encouraged to ‘exchange unpaid childcare work for low-paid work in order to employ another woman, on low wages, to provide childcare’ (Osgood, 2005, p. 295). In addition, rather than supporting the sustainability of childcare provision, the career progression of Early Years Practitioners has created a ‘workforce in flux’ (Osgood, 2005, p. 297). For example, she points out that Early Years Practitioners have moved from lower paid provisions within the sector, such as childminding or provision within the private, voluntary and private sector, to higher paid provision, such as working in nursery or reception classes within schools.

### **1.7.2 Discourse of the ‘technician’**

In contrast to the discourse of the ‘substitute mother’, the Early Years Practitioner has also been understood as a ‘technician’. Moss (2006, p. 35) describes a ‘technician’ as having ‘varying levels of skill and qualification’, tasked with applying ‘a defined set of technologies through regulated processes to produce pre-specified and measurable outcomes’. He suggests that Early Years Practitioners operate as ‘technicians’ within a neoliberal economic market, with early childhood provision as a marketable commodity and parents as consumers. For example, many early years provisions in the UK are profit-making with recent figures suggesting that 61% of all day nursery provision are privately owned (Rutter and Family Childcare Trust, 2017). Moss’s (2006) ideas of the ‘technician’ link closely to Osgood’s (2006b; 2009) analysis of developments in the early years workforce. Early Years Practitioners have been subject to increased state regulation and accountability resulting in an increased workload and emphasis on ‘technical competence and performativity’ (Osgood, 2006b; Bradbury, 2012). Since the Childcare Act 2006, all early years providers in England have been required to register and be subjected to inspection by Ofsted. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017a) was introduced in 2008 requiring children’s progress to be assessed and measured according to early learning goals. The review of early years qualifications by Nutbrown (2012a; 2012b) resulted in an overhaul of early years training and the introduction of the Level 3 Early Years Educator and the replacement of the Early Years Professional Status Level 6 qualification with the Early Years Teacher Status. Currently, 77% of Early Years Practitioners hold at least a Level 3 childcare qualification and 29% have at least a Level 6 qualification (DfE, 2017b).

Despite changes to training and qualifications, workforce turnover is high with 18% of Early Years Practitioners leaving the profession in 2016 because of low pay and lack of progression (NDNA, 2016). Changes to qualification requirements, such as the need for GCSE qualifications<sup>9</sup> in English and Mathematics at Level 3 and access to affordable and accessible training were cited as significant barriers for progression (NDNA, 2016).

The development of the early years workforce has been shaped by the historical split between the care and education of babies and young children, for example, those who ‘care’ being constructed as lower status and those who ‘educate’ being constructed as higher status (McGillivray, 2008). This difference has been reflected in pay, qualifications and work conditions, with teachers in schools (and maintained nursery schools) being better paid, generally more highly qualified and having better work conditions than most Early Years Practitioners working in other types of early years provision (McGillivray, 2008). One of the most significant developments to address the professionalisation of the early years workforce has been the Early Years Teacher Status (Lloyd and Hallet, 2010). The Early Years Teacher Status is a professional accreditation endorsed by the government for Early Years Practitioners who have achieved a set of professional standards. There are currently over 11,000 practitioners with Early Years Teacher Status working across England and training is widely available at a range of higher education institutions (DfE, 2013b). The Department for Education (2012a) has described the Early Years Teacher Status as the ‘gold standard’ of early years qualifications. Early Years Teacher Status was key to the New Labour Government’s approach to end child poverty as part of the reformed early years workforce delivering services to young children and families (HCCSFC, 2010). It was introduced in 2006 with the aim of having a graduate in every early years setting by the year 2015 (Payler and Locke, 2013). The role of the Early Years Teacher was intended to be that of a change agent, who would raise the standards within early years settings and lead practice within the Early Years Foundation Stage (McDowall-Clark, 2012).

Several issues have hampered the success of the Early Year Teacher Status. Originally,

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<sup>9</sup> From 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2017 functional skills were accepted as an equivalent to GCSEs for Early Years Practitioners as an attempt by the government to try and boost recruitment and retention in the early years workforce (DfE, 2017b)

Early Year Teacher Status was expected to have equivalency with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) (Simpson, 2010; Miller, 2008). This has been a source of contention due to the lack of parity with teachers' pay, conditions and status (for example, Brock, 2012; Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Miller, 2008; Osgood, 2009; and Davis and Barry 2013). Despite Nutbrown's (2012a; 2012b) recommendations that Early Years Teachers should be awarded an equivalent status to qualified teachers, the government decided not to follow her advice. Nutbrown (2012a; 2012b) warned that an Early Years Teacher Status which is not equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status would hold back recruitment in the early years. With a continuing disparity between Early Years Teacher Status and Qualified Teacher Status, the early years workforce is unlikely to recruit and retain high calibre Early Years Practitioners who are more likely to train as primary school teachers instead (Butler, 2017). Low pay and poor conditions for practitioners with Early Years Teacher Status may well continue a trend of early years graduates leaving the profession for better paid careers resulting in less qualified professionals working directly with children and families (Tickell, 2011).

In addition to the tensions experienced by those with Early Years Teacher Status, further tensions have been experienced for those without. Osgood (2009, p.744) argues that those without Early Years Teacher Status have been constructed as deficient, with potential for creating 'divisions and hostilities'. The introduction of Early Years Teacher Status challenged a historic model of apprenticeship training for Early Years Practitioners, for example, Payler and Locke (2013) found that a barrier to engaging with Early Years Teacher Status was a disregard of experience and an apprenticeship model of training. Overall, the discourse of the 'technician' reflects a workforce that has been professionalised in terms of the introduction of higher qualifications and the subjection to regulatory demands. However, despite these changes, many Early Years Practitioners continue to experience stagnating wages, low status and poor working conditions. Some of these difficulties could arguably be attributed to how attempts to professionalise the sector are shaped by classed discourses. As Osgood (2009) points out, on the one hand, professionalisation reflects a middle-class discourse of becoming a respected and learned expert within a field; on the other hand, Early Years Practitioners have been constructed within a working-class discourse of the 'substitute mother', 'who casually embarks upon a default career because they have a natural predisposition determined by gender and class' (Osgood, 2009, p. 738), creating a disconnect between how Early Years Practitioners have been constructed and a



discourse of professionalisation.

### **1.7.3 Discourse of the ‘new agent’**

Lloyd and Hallet (2010) argue that despite the challenges for Early Years Practitioners, there is opportunity for progress to be made in repositioning the early years workforce. Drawing on the work of Osgood (2006a; 2006b), Ball (2015) and Davies et al. (2005), it could be argued that Early Years Practitioners have the potential to be re-positioned as ‘new agents’ with the potential to challenge, contest and change discourse. Osgood (2006a; 2006b) proposes that Early Years Practitioners can ‘oppose’ and transform the existing order through a new professionalism: a professionalism which, firstly, embraces ‘ethics of care’ recognising the importance of supporting and protecting children and families; and secondly, acknowledges the importance of critical reflection on how Early Years Practitioners have been positioned and how they can be re-positioned. Osgood (2006a; 2006b) argues that through constructing an alternative ‘professionalism’, Early Years Practitioners can position themselves and construct their professional identities as something different. Osgood (2006b) draws on Foucault’s (1975[1979]) notion of surveillance to illustrate how mechanisms of power are used invisibly to control Early Years Practitioners through workforce reform and policy. Foucault’s (1975[1979]) analysis of Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ prison design suggests that the prisoners become self-regulatory because of the invisibility of surveillance. Applying this concept to Early Years Practitioners, Osgood (2006b, p.7) argues that ‘through policy, workforce reform and concomitant objectifying practices of constant surveillance [...] the way in which power is exercised is largely invisible’ and difficult to challenge. De Certeau (1984) suggests that it is possible to resist or subvert mechanisms of control. In line with this view, Osgood (2006b, p. 6) argues that the ‘regulatory gaze’ on Early Years Practitioners ‘can be, if not entirely resisted, at least negotiated/challenged’ suggesting that Early Years Practitioners are active agents in how they reproduce, interpret and transform policy.

Ball (2015) elaborates on how regimes of truth might be refused at the site of the subject through the telling of ‘truths’ in the everyday life. Although his study focuses on teachers in schools, it arguably has some resonance with how Early Years Practitioners might contest discourse. He examines how teachers have refused, ‘rather than resist[ed]’, neoliberalism, concluding that the individual [or subject] is a ‘site of struggle’ (Ball, 2015, p. 1130). Through an analysis of teachers’ micro critical

practices, such as ‘parrhesia’ (truth telling or fearless speech), he concluded that teachers are able to contest prevailing discourses (Ball, 2015, p. 1138). Arguably the same ‘micro critical practices’ are available for Early Years Practitioners. However, others are more cynical about Early Years Practitioner’s agency and ability to resist neoliberal policy. Bradbury’s (2012, p. 183) study with teachers working in schools with children aged four to five years found that, although there was resistance, this tended to be ‘passive’, such as criticising the system but feeling powerless to change it; or at the best ‘cynical compliance’, tokenistic compliance to government policy at a significant emotional cost.

Davies et al. (2005, p. 344) consider how the ‘subject’ (for example, the Early Years Practitioner) is constituted within neoliberalism whilst at the same time being a ‘possible locus of revolt’. They draw on the concept of ‘chiasma’, as a metaphor, to understand the cross-overs between discourse and embodiment and one discourse and another. The concept of ‘chiasma’ is drawn from the field of biology and the process that occurs during meiosis in sexual reproduction where:

two chromosomes of a homologous pair, one being of maternal origin and the other of paternal origin, cross over, and in that process exchange equivalent segments with each other, each thus becoming in part, the other (Davies et al., 2005, p. 345).

They argue that although the body is vulnerable to neoliberal discourses it is not an ‘idle victim’ or ‘confined’ to the dominant discourse (Davies et al., 2005, p. 346). In other words, the body is formed out of ‘multiple crossings’, so rather than creating a ‘binary’ between a ‘good’ discourse and a ‘bad’ discourse there is ‘possible leakage’ from one discourse into another (Davies, et al., 2005, p. 347). Thus, the concept of ‘chiasma’ creates the possibility for Early Years Practitioners to inhabit more than one discourse at the same time, providing opportunities for new discourses to be created through the merging of existing discourses, such as the ‘substitute mother’ and ‘technician’.

## **1.8 Summary**

Over the last two decades, early years provision has become more integrated supporting an agenda of welfare to work. However, austerity policies and cuts to funding have impacted on both children’s centres and maintained nursery schools resulting in closures and amalgamations and challenges for Early Years Practitioners in terms of addressing poverty. A discourse of the ‘substitute mother’ reflects how, historically, the

early years workforce has been made up, to a large extent, of low-paid female practitioners working in a low status sector constrained under austerity policies. Despite workforce reforms, these issues remain largely unaddressed within discourses of the ‘technician’. For example, the introduction of the Early Years Teacher Status has failed to address issues of equity with Qualified Teacher Status. In addition, further tensions have emerged for Early Years Practitioners in regard to work-life balance, such as being a mother and a worker. Ethics of care are undervalued and Early Years Practitioners continue to leave the sector for better pay and progression opportunities. However, Osgood (2006b) argues that there is space and opportunity to challenge dominant discourses through the emergence of the ‘new agent’.

### **1.9 Structure of the thesis**

The next chapter considers concepts and discourses of poverty in relation to dominant government discourses. It ends with a discussion of how Early Years Practitioners position themselves within the discourses of poverty. In Chapter Three the methodological and theoretical approach to the thesis is discussed in more detail, including the research design, analytical approach and discussion of ethical issues. Within Chapters Four and Five the findings and analysis of the study are discussed, with Chapter Four focusing on Early Years Practitioners’ narratives of poverty in early childhood and Chapter Five examining how Early Years Practitioners’ narratives of poverty are shaped by personal and professional experiences. Chapter Six discusses the conclusions of the thesis including the contribution to knowledge, reflections on the methodological approach and recommendations for policy and practice.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature review**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, concepts and discourses of poverty are analysed in relation to poverty in early childhood. A multi-dimensional concept of poverty is presented which draws on both absolute and relative understandings. Building on the work of Levitas (1998) and Townsend (1979), discourses of redistribution, work, and underclass are analysed in relation to English government policy since 1997. It is proposed that underlying all three discourses is an overarching discourse of ‘moral responsibility’, with discourses of redistribution holding society responsible for addressing poverty and discourses of work and underclass holding the individual responsible. Redistributionist discourses address the issues of poverty through collective responsibility and the de-stratification of society and the more equal distribution of power and material resources (Townsend, 1979, p. 63). Discourses of work address poverty through collective and individual responsibility, for example, giving a ‘hand up’ to those wanting to work. Discourses of an underclass focus on the moral character of the poor and holding the individual responsible for both causing and solving their own poverty (Levitas, 1998). I argue that a discourse of redistribution has largely been ignored and instead successive government approaches to address poverty have largely been dominated by discourses of work and an underclass, embodying a neoliberal regime of truth, intersecting with gendered and classed inequalities.

#### **2.1 What is poverty?**

According to Alcock (2006, p. 4), poverty is an ‘inherently contested concept’ with disagreement about what it is and how it should be addressed. As he points out understandings of poverty are immersed with ‘what should be done about it’, therefore definitions, measurement, causes and solutions are intrinsically intertwined (Alcock, 2006, p.4). Poverty has largely been understood in relative and absolute terms (Lister, 2004). Absolute poverty relates to ‘a minimum standard of living based on a person’s biological needs for food, water, clothing and shelter’, the minimum physical needs in order to sustain life and subsistence (Oppenheim, 1993, p. 6). However, Townsend (1979), in his landmark study of poverty in the UK, argued that an absolute measure of poverty was insufficient. He argued that poverty must be considered in relation to people’s needs according to the society they live in, with consideration given to time

and place, style of living and distribution of resources. In contrast to an absolute concept he understood poverty as relative:

Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities (Townsend, 1979, p.31).

Townsend (1979) suggested that poverty must consider the inequalities within the society including both objective measures of poverty (such as income) and subjective measures of poverty (such as the extent to which an individual might feel they belong). He suggested that, as access to resources diminishes, there is a point at which an individual or family withdraws from the ‘participation in the customs and activities sanctioned by the culture’, which could be defined as the poverty line (Townsend, 1979, p. 31). In order to establish a poverty line, he proposed that a multi-dimensional approach was needed which took account of income, assets, employer benefits, state benefits and private income.

Mack and Lansley (1985) extended Townsend’s (1979) work on relative poverty. They argued that minimum living standards for adults and children change over time and need to reflect contemporary life styles. They developed a ‘consensual’ concept of poverty based on the opinion of a representative sample of the population in England, Scotland and Wales. Their work resulted in a list which included items essential for participation in society, as well as items essential to living, such as food, shelter and clothing. Overall, they found a strong consensus ‘across social and income groups, across gender, education levels, ethnicity’ which concurred with similar research conducted in other countries (Lansley and Mack, 2015, p. 25). The list acknowledged both material and income items, which Townsend (1979) refers to as ‘objective measures’. However, it did little to acknowledge what Townsend (1979) refers to as ‘subjective measures’ of poverty, such as the extent to which an individual might feel they belong within a society.

Lister (2004, p.22) suggests that the dichotomy between absolute and relative understandings of poverty is unhelpful and problematic, suggesting that the term ‘relative’ can be interpreted as both *comparisons* in terms of whether poverty exists and in terms of human *needs*. In terms of *comparisons*, she argues that it is only possible to

judge if someone is in poverty if they live in the same society at the same point in time. Therefore, *comparisons* are unhelpful if wanting to compare poverty in the northern and southern hemispheres of the world. For example, comparisons of poverty within the Central African Republic, the poorest country in the world, may look very different from comparisons of poverty within the UK, the 27<sup>th</sup> richest country in the world (International Monetary Fund, 2016). Defining poverty according to *needs* is equally problematic depending on whether needs are conceptualised as an objective fact, or a social construction based on social, historical and cultural context (Lister, 2004). Townsend (1979) argues that *needs* are a social construction, even physiological needs, such as food and clothes. For example, Knight et al. (2018, p. 191) argue that food poverty is not just about 'going without food' but is multi-dimensional, including the quantity, quality, social and emotional and psychological aspects of food.

Rather than seeing absolute and relative understandings of poverty in opposition, Lister (2004) argues that the two can be reconciled. Drawing on the work of Sen (1983) she suggests that relative and absolute understandings of poverty can be integrated into one framework. Sen (1983) argues that relative concepts of poverty concentrate on inequality and the difference between rich and poor, however, they do not address the difference between achieving 'relative less than others' and 'achieving absolutely less because of falling behind others' (Sen, 1983, p. 55). For example, there is arguably a difference between the rise of families in the UK who have become increasingly dependent on charitable food banks (Lambie-Mumford, 2015) compared to families who do not have enough money to take their family on holiday. To address this issue, Sen (1983, p.159) proposes that poverty is both relative and core. For example, some elements are core and remain stable over time, such as malnutrition. Other elements, such as the standard of living, are dynamic and differ according to the society lived in. He stresses that poverty is not just about recognising relative and absolute understandings but also about the commodities (access to goods and services) and capabilities (the extent to which someone can function in society). Ridge (2011) found that wearing the right trainers was important for children on low incomes to confer 'coolness' and ameliorate the effects of bullying. So, for some children the right pair of trainers is a relative commodity, in that most children in the area have branded clothes. However, in terms of capabilities and avoiding shame and stigma, having the right trainers may be experienced as an absolute requirement.

In summary, poverty is both complex and difficult to define which makes understanding poverty as either absolute or relative problematic. On the one hand, an absolute definition does not account for differences in people's needs according to the society they live in. On the other hand, a relative definition of poverty makes it difficult to differentiate between absolute needs (such as food and shelter), and relative comparisons (such as the importance of owning branded goods). It is argued that poverty is dynamic and multi-dimensional, therefore a concept of poverty requires both absolute and relative understandings, for example how poverty is experienced relative to society, as well as a recognition of a universal absolute core.

## **2.2 UK measures of poverty**

In 2010 the New Labour Government's Child Poverty Act introduced four measures of child poverty: relative income, combined low income and material deprivation, absolute income and persistent poverty. The most commonly cited of the four measures is the relative low-income target, where a child was deemed to be in poverty if the household's income fell below 60% of the median. Although the measures were about child poverty, they are also arguably a measure of family poverty, as children are inextricably linked to the lives of those they live with. The Coalition (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) Government which took office in 2010 criticised New Labour's measures suggesting that a focus on household income was too narrow. Their report on the 2010 child poverty targets chastised New Labour for missing their targets by 600,000 children (DWP and DfE, 2012), arguing that the reduction in child poverty figures by 300,000 was due to 'poverty plus a pound', a fall in the national median income under an economic down turn, as opposed to a real rise in income. They proposed the need for 'better measurements of child poverty which include income but provide a more accurate picture of the reality of child poverty' (DWP and DfE, 2012, p.5).

In Autumn 2012 the Coalition Government published their consultation on 'Measuring Child Poverty', proposing a multi-dimensional measure which included: income and material deprivation, worklessness, unmanageable debt, poor housing, parental skills level, access to quality education, family stability and parental health (HM Government, 2012). Bradshaw (2013) criticised the Coalition Government's proposals arguing that they had failed to recognise that the Child Poverty Act 2010 already had multi-dimensional measures, including material deprivation and persistent poverty, as

well as financial measures of relative and absolute poverty. He argued that all of the Coalition's proposed poverty dimensions, apart from income and material deprivation, were in fact not measures of poverty, but instead, factors associated with or outcomes of poverty. Child Poverty Action Group CEO, Alison Garnham (2013, p.2) presented a strong argument for keeping income central to the poverty measure, proposing that a 'key resource required to live a decent life is an adequate income'. She suggested that the dimensions proposed in 'Measuring Child Poverty' (HM Government, 2012) gave the impression that children in poverty live with families who are workless, in debt, poor at parenting and unstable, whilst failing to recognise the high rates of in-work poverty. For example, at least 67% of children in poverty live in working families (McGuinness, 2018). Moreover, as Churchill (2013, p. 218) points out, there was little recognition in the Coalition's proposed dimensions about structural inequalities, such as employment opportunities and 'gendered divisions of labour and discrimination'.

Garnham (2013) argued that a key driver for changing the poverty measures was to mask the likely increase to child poverty as a result of policy changes to benefits, tax credits and housing support (as projected by Brewer et al., 2011). In 2016 the Welfare Reform and Work Act repealed parts of the Child Poverty Act 2010 and it was renamed the Life Chances Act (2010[2016]). The government planned to replace the existing poverty measures with two new measures: children living in workless households in England; and the educational attainment of children at the end of Key Stage Four<sup>10</sup>. Following campaigns by leading UK poverty charities, such as the Child Poverty Action Group [CPAG], the government conceded a legal commitment to keep the existing measures in addition to the two new measures (Sinclair-Taylor, 2016). The attempt by the government to remove financial measures and replace these with measures which include workless households suggests a strengthening of a discourse of the underclass. For example, Gordon (2018) argues that cuts to benefits and services concurred with a political and media focus on a stigmatising discourse of 'welfare scroungers'. In addition, the renaming of the 'Child Poverty Act 2010' as the 'Life Chances Act 2010[2016]' perhaps suggests that poverty can be ameliorated by simply removing the word 'poverty' (Gordon, 2018).

In June 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union (triggering the process known

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<sup>10</sup> In England, children are aged 15 years old at the end of Key Stage Four.



as Brexit). The Social Mobility Commission (2017a, p. vii) suggests that, since the referendum, the Government is ‘understandably focused on Brexit’ and has ‘little headspace’ to develop an ‘overall national strategy to tackle the social, economic and geographical divide the country faces’. In place of a promised green paper on social justice, the government has published, ‘Improving Lives: helping workless families’, a policy paper focused on workless families and problems relating to relationships, mental health and debt, including the continuation of the ‘Troubled Families Programme’ (DWP, 2017). CPAG (2017a) argues that the Government has continued to ignore structural inequalities, such as in-work poverty and household income. Cooper and Stewart’s (2017, p. 1) international longitudinal systematic review of the relationship between household financial resources and children’s outcomes concluded that ‘money in itself does matter for children’s outcomes; poorer children have worse outcomes in part because they are poor and not just because of other factors that are associated with low income’. However, despite evidence to the contrary, government policy has moved away from a focus on income and structural inequalities and instead reflects a policy discourse increasingly focused on family deficit and a discourse of an underclass.

### **2.3 Discourses of poverty**

Lister (2015, p. 140) argues that there is a need to ‘move beyond statistics’ and definitions of poverty to understand the ‘experience of poverty’, in terms of the relational as well as the material. In this next section, drawing on Foucault’s (1977[1980]) concepts of knowledge, truth and power, I discuss discourses of poverty. According to Foucault (1977[1980], p.131):

Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

If each society has its regime of truth, then it follows that there are discourses around poverty in early childhood which, as Foucault (1977[1980], p. 131) suggests, are ‘accepted and function as true’ and there are those ‘who [are] charged with saying what counts as true’. In the discussion below, it is argued that a redistributionist discourse has largely been ignored in favour of dominant discourses of work and an underclass which have served to ‘other’ those in poverty.

### 2.3.1 Discourses of redistribution

#### *Issues of inequality*

According to Townsend (1979), a redistributionist discourse addresses poverty through the more equal distribution of power and material resources primarily through government taxes. Recent evidence suggests that such an approach can be effective, for example, the OECD (2015) reported that, for many countries in Europe, greater inequality of income has led to slower economic growth, whilst redistributionist approaches through taxes and benefits, have led to greater equality and increased economic growth. Over the last three decades, income inequality in the UK has increased and is higher than many other countries in Europe (OECD, 2017). Although the UK has been effective at creating jobs since the recession in 2008, and total employment is high compared to other countries in Europe, low and stagnating wage levels have put more people at risk of poverty. Since 2008, income inequality in the UK has remained largely constant, however, there has been a sharp increase in income for those in the top one percent (McGuinness, 2018). Dorling (2015) states that when the divide between the top 1% and the 99% is wide, countries become poorer overall. Rather than wealth trickling down from the 1% and leading to greater equality it instead trickles up from the 99% to the 1% thereby increasing inequality (Dorling, 2017). Summers and Balls (2015) argue that government policies, such as austerity measures and low taxes for those with the greatest incomes, have increased inequality and hampered economic growth.

#### *Who is vulnerable to poverty?*

Although poverty can happen to anyone (for example, as a result of unexpected life events), some groups are more vulnerable to poverty than others, intersecting with gender, class and ethnicity (CPAG, 2018a). Lone parents are particularly vulnerable to poverty, with 47% of people in lone-parent families living in poverty (Marsh et al., 2017). Millar and Ridge (2013, p. 564) suggest that lone mothers are at high risk of poverty because they experience 'lower employment rates than married mothers with children of the same ages' and 'often work part-time and in low-paid jobs'. As discussed later in this chapter, gender intersects with social class resulting in teenage and lone mothers being particularly vulnerable to poverty and stigmatisation (Allen and Taylor, 2012). According to the Joseph Rowntree Trust (2017) Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups are twice as likely as white groups to live in poverty due to intersecting issues of unemployment, economic activity, lower pay, geographic

location, migration status and educational attainment. The experience of minority ethnic groups in poverty is further intersected with gender. For example, Black Caribbean, Mixed and Black African families tend to have more lone parent families than other groups resulting in mothers experiencing multiple disadvantage in terms of gender, ethnicity and being a lone mother (Emejulu, 2008). Vargas-Silva et al. (2016) argues that the circumstances of migrants make them particularly vulnerable to poverty, suggesting that they are preferred by employers for low-paid jobs with poor working conditions and irregular hours because of their perceived ‘work ethic’ of being hard working.

### *Childhood and poverty*

Childhood is a particularly vulnerable time in terms of poverty (Lister, 2004: Alcock, 2006; Ridge and Wright, 2008). Ridge (2011), in her review of research about low income children in the UK, concluded that poverty permeates every area of children’s lives including the economic, social and relational causing isolation and exclusion from society. By the age of five there is a significant gap in children’s educational attainments between those living in less affluent areas and those living in other areas – this continues throughout their experience of education (DfE, 2014b; Social Mobility Commission, 2017b). Children living in areas of deprivation are likely to have an increased risk of health issues and a shorter life expectancy (ONS, 2014). Recent statistics suggest that overall the trend is becoming worse, for example, the Longevity Science Panel (2018) reported that differences in life expectancy between the richest and poorest has widened since 2001.

### *Housing and poverty*

The link between inadequate housing and the negative impact on children’s health is well established (CIH, NHF and Shelter, 2012). The introduction of the ‘Right to Buy’ policy under the Housing Act 1980, resulted in a significant decline in the availability of social housing in the UK (Watts, 2008). As discussed by Watts (2008, p. 347) social households have moved away from a ‘broad cross section of manual workers and their families’ to ‘an economically deprived class fraction’ with ‘non-existent’ or ‘low paid’ employment. More recently, Shelter’s (2018) analysis of data from the Department of Work and Pensions highlights how cuts to council budgets, high housing costs and reductions in housing benefits have made it increasingly difficult for local authorities to find suitable homes for families. In 2017, 55% of families living in temporary

accommodation were in work (Shelter, 2018). Temporary accommodation is a particular issue for lone parents with many families living in temporary accommodation for prolonged periods of time, often experiencing a lack of space and limited access to adequate cooking facilities (Gerada, 2018). In addition, for those living in private rented accommodation, the risk of poverty is significantly increased, rising to 37% once housing costs are taken into account (Marsh et al., 2017).

### *Redistribution*

To address issues of structural inequality, both Levitas (1998) and Townsend (1979) proposed a discourse of redistribution. Townsend (1979, p. 564) argued that:

National action to remedy poverty – through incomes policy, full employment, less specialization of work roles, higher social security benefits, new forms of allowances and rate support grants and a more redistributive tax structure – is implied.

Alongside a more redistributive tax structure, he suggested that full employment and benefits, as well as access to ‘the customs, activities and pleasures generally available within society’ would lead to the de-stratification of society and the more equal distribution of power and material resources (Townsend, 1979, p. 63). More recent approaches to redistribution build on these ideas, for example, the OECD (2015, p.37) propose that the divide between rich and poor should be addressed by a focus on ‘women’s participation in economic life; employment promotion and good quality jobs; skills and education; and tax and transfer systems for efficient redistribution’. In terms of work they suggest that, as employment rises, income inequality should reduce as the number of people not working or relying on benefits decreases. However, this is unlikely to be an effective solution for women in low paid sectors, such as Early Years Practitioners, unless wages, the cost of childcare and conditions of work improve.

### **2.3.2 Discourses of work**

Levitas (1998) argues that the discourse about paid work developed from the New Labour Government’s concerns about social exclusion associated with the perceived breakdown of society and family structure. New Labour’s policy approach has been characterised by the ‘Third Way’, one which addressed both individual rights and social responsibility (Gillies, 2014). Their overall policy approach was influenced by the work of Anthony Giddens (1998) who tried to balance neoliberal principles of a free market with the role of the state in creating equal opportunity for everyone. Tony Blair’s (Prime Minister for New Labour 1997-2010) aim was ‘social justice’, ‘the basis for a

community where everyone has the chance to succeed' (Blair, 1999, p. 2). Simpson (2013) argues that New Labour's ideology was based on creating a meritocracy, a society where individuals succeed according to merit.

*The New Labour Government's approach – 'a hand up not a hand out'*

In his Beveridge lecture, Blair (1999) laid out plans for how he was going to eradicate child poverty by 2020, proposing a radical change to the welfare state. He stated that welfare would be a 'hand up not a hand out' and the state would become an 'enabler' with help going to those with the 'most need' including a mix of 'targeted and universal support' (Blair, 1999, p. 1). Arguably, New Labour's 'third way' approach drew on both a redistributionist discourse and welfare to work, providing redistribution through benefits for those who could not work and the promotion of paid work for those who could. New Labour were committed to supporting parents into work as part of their strategy for welfare reform (Millar and Ridge, 2013). To help support mothers into work, New Labour aimed to provide good quality and affordable childcare through initiatives such as Sure Start. In addition, New Labour introduced 12.5 hours free childcare for four-year-olds, which was extended to three-year-olds in April 2004 (West and Noden, 2016). In 2006, free childcare funding for two-year-olds was introduced which was later rolled out to all local authorities in 2009 (Gibb et al., 2011). Parents were entitled to the funding if they received certain benefits (Gov.UK, 2018b). Sutherland and Piachaud (2001, p. 95) point out, the main incentive for encouraging families into work was Working Families Tax Credit which guaranteed a minimum income for those in paid work. However, not all parents benefited from the changes to welfare policy, for example, lone parents were worse off under New Labour's policies than pre-1997 (Sutherland and Piachaud, 2001).

New Labour's policies were aimed at creating more opportunity for parents in the market place within a discourse which was heavily classed and gendered. As women are mostly responsible for children's care in the UK, mothers bore the 'brunt of initiatives and sanctions designed to promote good parenting' (Gillies, 2005, p. 841). Gewirtz (2001) argues that a significant part of New Labour's strategy to address child poverty was focused on changing attitudes through the re-socialisation of working-class parents who were socially excluded and living in areas of disadvantage. She suggests that government policy was focused on 'reconstructing and transforming working-class parents into middle-class ones' (Gewirtz, 2001, p. 366). She supports her argument with

the notion that New Labour tried to universalise the desirable attributes which they assumed middle-class parents possessed, such as being active consumers and proactive with their children's education. She proposed that New Labour failed to examine why poor 'working-class parents do not behave like middle-class parents in the first place', ignoring issues of low incomes, ill health and poor housing (Gewirtz, 2001, p. 374). In addition, the policy did not address issues of work for mothers of young children and failed to acknowledge women's unpaid labour, caring responsibilities, low pay and gender inequality within the labour market as well as the increase in women's overall workload in terms of paid and unpaid work (Levitas, 1998). Lastly, New Labour's policy positioned working-class parents as deficient, unable to provide sufficiently for their children. Gillies (2005) concurs with Gewirtz's (2001) argument that a meritocratic ideology was embedded within New Labour's approach to child poverty. As Gillies (2005, p. 837) points out, 'from this perspective, prosperity derives from being the right kind of (middle-class) self, while poverty and disadvantage is associated with poor self-management'.

Under New Labour's policies, the number of children in poverty decreased by one million during their term of office, yet in real terms poverty levels had not moved far from peak levels of poverty in the 1990s (Aldridge et al., 2012). Reductions in poverty were most significant in workless families, however, in-work poverty had risen significantly despite increases in employment and qualifications. By 2011 employment had increased by 20% and more men and women were more qualified than ever before (Aldridge et al., 2012). However, a more qualified workforce and higher employment rates failed to have an impact on poverty because too many families were working too few hours (exacerbated by high housing and childcare costs) to get their income sufficiently above the poverty line (Aldridge et al., 2012).

*The Coalition Government and Conservative Government approaches – 'work pays'*

Post 2010 changes in government have triggered a shift from a discourse of 'welfare to work' to a discourse of 'work pays'. Jones (2015) explains how the discourse of New Labour's over-spending was 'pushed' by the Conservative government and the media, paving the way for the introduction of austerity measures. Similarly, Mendoza (2015) argues that austerity measures worked hand-in-hand with neoliberalism in the dismantling of the welfare state and privatisation of services through a series of ideologically driven spending cuts. Churchill (2013), in her review of policy changes,

reports that this was followed by cuts to family support and children's services. As Simpson (2013, p. 87) points out, rather than taking New Labour's approach of transferring incomes to poorer families via tax credits, the Coalition (and later the Conservative Government) under the title of 'social justice' aimed intensive support and services at the most disadvantaged to support families into the labour market. Goulden (2014; 2017) argues that the policy reflected a persistent myth, that people are better off on benefits than working. Cognisant of this view, Bamfield (2012, p. 832) suggests their actions were a moral imperative in terms of reducing 'state hand-outs to the poorest in society, lest they became trapped in a state of welfare dependency that erodes personal and social responsibility'.

As a consequence of the Coalition Government's policy, benefits and children's services were cut with lone mothers affected more than any other group (Gillies, 2014). For example, Millar and Ridge (2013), in their 'Family Work Project', argue that gender and class issues pervade experience for lone mothers on low incomes. Most of the women in their study were in low-paid, unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, sometimes disrupted by 'sickness, redundancy, insecure employment and temporary work' (Millar and Ridge, 2013, p. 568). Most of the women agreed that working was better than being on income support and were financially better off, however, almost all relied on tax credits as wages were not sufficient. Many of the women continued to experience financial strains, including high levels of debt, and health issues, including stress and depression. Overall, despite being in work, many of the families were 'unable to move far from the poverty line' and remained vulnerable to small changes in incomes or circumstances (Millar and Ridge, 2013, p. 574).

Examples of two of the most significant policies under the Coalition and Conservative Governments aimed at supporting parents into work have been the introduction of Universal Credit and the increase in free childcare. The discussion below argues that both policies mask issues of gender and social class and do little to address poverty in real terms.

#### *Universal credit – 'work pays and is seen to pay'*

Universal Credit was introduced in 2013 under the Coalition Government's Welfare Reform Act 2012 which replaced several of the previous tax credits and benefits, such as housing benefit, working tax credit and child tax credit (Gov.UK, 2017a). Iain

Duncan Smith in the introduction to the white paper ‘Welfare to Work’ stated that:

At its heart, Universal Credit is very simple and will ensure that work always pays and is seen to pay (DWP, 2010, p. 1).

The aim of Universal Credit was to reform the benefit system making it more affordable and more able to ‘tackle poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency’ (DWP, 2010, p. 2). The idea was to provide an integrated working age credit which would replace several of the previous tax credits and benefits and provide stronger incentives for work. Universal Credit has been subject to criticism both in the press and from leading child poverty charities. CPAG (2017b, p.2) argues that Universal Credit punishes lone parents and couples with very young children where one parent does not work or works a relatively small number of hours, for example, changes and cuts to Universal Credit, such as the benefits cap, reduction in work allowances and child benefits, has resulted in a system which is less generous than the one it replaced and the ‘promise of reducing poverty’ is no longer on offer. Portes and Reed (2018, p. 15) suggest that ‘one and a half million more children’ are likely ‘to be living in households below the relative poverty line’ as a result of Universal Credit. Already, there are signs that suggest that families are being affected, for example, The Trussell Trust (2017) reported a 30% increase in use of food banks where Universal Credit had been rolled out. Rabindrakumar (2018, p. 7) highlights how the pressure to take a job ‘can mean more insecure, rather than sustainable, work and limited gains in living standards as a result’, particularly for lone parents. There has been a significant increase in precarious work, for example, 2.8% of those employed have a zero-hours contract, a contract which does not guarantee a minimum number of hours in a given week (ONS, 2018). Thus for Early Years Practitioners on low wages and part-time hours, and the families they support in similar circumstances, Universal Credit is unlikely to deliver on its promise to ‘make work pay’.

### *Childcare*

Affordable and available childcare is essential for parents, particularly mothers with young children, to move from welfare to work. As Harding et al (2017, p.3) point out ‘parents make decisions about whether, where and for how many hours they work based on the cost and availability of childcare in their local area’. Despite the government’s increased spending in this area, the price of childcare has continued to rise (Rutter, 2015). Consequently, some parents do not gain financially from moving into work, particularly if they have high childcare costs (Harding et al., 2017). Part of the Coalition



and Conservative Governments' offer to address childcare issues has been the extension of government funded childcare. In September 2010, funded early education was increased to 15 hours per week for all three and four-year-olds (West and Noden, 2016). In addition, in September 2013, free early education was also extended for the 'most disadvantaged two-year-olds' (Gov.UK, 2013, p. 1). The Childcare Act 2016 set a duty to secure 30 hours of free childcare for working parents for children under the age of 5 years old. The policy was introduced in England for children aged three to four years old in September 2017. The aim of the 30 hours extension was that 'additional free childcare will help families by reducing the cost of childcare and will support parents into work or to work more hours if they wish to do so' (DfE, 2015, p.4). Paull et al.'s (2017) evaluation of the early implementation of the 30 free childcare hours found that although many providers were willing and able to offer the extended hours, there were several issues which were likely to impact on future engagement, such as financial viability, staff retention and recruitment. Brewer et al. (2016) suggest that the extension of free care hours is unlikely to increase parental employment, as the policy is aimed at parents who are already working. In addition, Johnes and Hutchinson (2016) predict that the policy will disadvantage families on the lowest incomes who do not qualify for the 30-hour entitlement and tax-free childcare. So far, these predictions seem plausible with early evidence suggesting that the 30 hours free childcare is benefitting couples and those already in paid work more than lone parents and those not in paid work (Paull et al., 2017). For many families, work does not pay and the policies to date have done little to reduce poverty through employment, as evidenced by high rates of in-work poverty (McGuinness, 2018).

### **2.3.3 An underclass discourse.**

The term 'underclass' was originally used by Townsend (1979), without negative connotations, to describe the position of the poor within the class structure. During the 1990s, the term 'underclass' took on negative cultural associations and became understood as a rejection of paid work in favour of state benefits and a breakdown of family structure (Levitas, 1998). A discourse of the underclass suggests that welfare benefits promote dependency on the state. It can be seen as neoliberal in function, in placing the problem of poverty with the individual rather than tackling structural inequalities and recognising the responsibility of the state (Bullen and Kenway, 2006).

*Deserving and undeserving poor*

The discourse of an underclass harkens back to the Victorian New Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 (amendment of the Poor Relief Act 1601) and an understanding of those in poverty as either ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ (Ridge and Wright, 2008). The moral discourse of the New Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 made a distinction between the ‘master evil’, fit, working age men who were able to work but unwilling and the ‘impotent poor’, those who were too old, young or ill to work (Walker and Chase, 2014). The Poor House was there as deterrent or punishment and public funding was only offered to those who were in dire need. Structural inequalities were reinforced, as those who were most vulnerable to poverty were not able working-age men but instead women, children, those with a disability and/or health condition and the old. Ridge and Wright (2008) argue that the discourse of the ‘undeserving’ and ‘deserving’ poor continues to pervade government policy. Tyler (2013, p. 170) concurs with Ridge and Wright (2008) arguing that the discourse of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor continues to reproduce a moral distinction between ‘honest hard-working families’ and the ‘parasitical, pathological underclass’.

*Othering, stigma and shame*

Walker and Chase (2014) suggest the experience of poverty is a co-construction, a combination of both internal and external judgements. For example, poverty is determined by others as well as the self, in that people are shamed by others for being poor as well as feeling shame (Walker, 2014, p. 120). Rancière (1998, p. 27) suggests that ‘we can arrive at a positional comparison of the political relationships between same and other that determine belief in a given historical truth regime or regime of untruth’. Applying this concept to those in poverty, Lister (2004; 2015) argues that a process of ‘othering’ has legitimised the discourse of the underclass through the way that political rhetoric, policy and the media has served to stigmatise and shame the poor. She suggests that the ‘notion of “the poor” as Other<sup>11</sup> is used [...] to signify the many ways in which “the poor” are treated as different from the rest of society.’ The process of ‘Othering’ is ongoing perpetuated by the ‘non-poor’, drawing a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Lister, 2004, p. 101). As described by Chase and Walker (2012, p. 741), ‘the “them” looking *up* the hierarchy are those with power and influence who remain ignorant of, and insensitive to, the circumstances of “us” facing hardship –

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<sup>11</sup> Lister (2004, p. 101) uses the capital ‘O’ to ‘denote its symbolic weight’.

indeed “they look down on us”. Thus through a process of stigmatisation and labelling, the underclass are constructed as undeserving or a moral threat. As Lister (2004) points out ‘othering’ results in blaming ‘them’ (the poor) for their own and society’s problems and legitimises the privilege and position of ‘us’ (the non-poor). Jones (2015, p. xiii) argues that these practices serve to reinforce a neoliberal regime of truth that poverty is caused by personal failings and that inequality is merely a product of ‘differing talent and ability’.

Lister (2004; 2015) proposes that those identified as being in poverty try to dissociate themselves from the shame and stigma of poverty through the creation of narratives that there are others worse off or by denying their own poverty. Chase and Walker (2012, p. 742), in their study with parents living in poverty in the south-east of England, found that the terms ‘poor’ or ‘poverty’ were rarely used by participants, instead there were ‘allusions to current or past financial hardship’. In addition, the social stratification associated with ‘them’ and ‘us’ was complex. The ‘them’ generally ‘referred to people with power and money’ who ‘had “no clue” about how much we were struggling’, whereas, the ‘us’ referred to people who were in the same situation and ‘who would help when they could’ (Chase and Walker, 2012, p. 749). A further categorisation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ identified those who were vulnerable to being defined as the ‘other’ distancing themselves by passing the label to ‘others’ (Chase and Walker, 2012). For example, those who were not working and/or on benefits distanced themselves from media portrayals of ‘benefit scroungers’, such as young mothers on benefits. Similar findings have been reported by Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) who suggest that people in poverty are more likely to blame poverty in other people’s lives as a consequence of mismanagement or moral failure. Chase and Walker (2012) suggest that this ‘projected shaming’ helps to mitigate any shame or anticipated shame experienced by those in poverty.

Lister (2004, p.118), drawing on the work of Goffman (1968), points out that where the ‘stigma<sup>12</sup> of poverty is internalised, shame is a likely consequence’, resulting in the

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<sup>12</sup> Goffman (1968, p.12) refers to stigma as ‘possessing an attribute’ which makes someone ‘different from others in the category of persons available for [them] to be, and of a less desirable kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak’ reducing the person ‘from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one’.

concealment of their poverty. For example, Ridge (2011) found that, for children in poverty, the emotional impact of trying to ‘fit in’ or ‘join in’ results in experiences of humiliation and shame which are often hidden. Chase and Walker (2012, p. 740) argue that shame is always a co-construction:

Combining an internal judgement of one’s own inabilities; an anticipated assessment of how one will be judged by others; and the actual verbal or symbolic gestures of others who consider, or are deemed to consider, themselves to be socially and/or morally superior to the person sensing shame.

Success in the UK is largely measured in terms of economic success and material consumption. Therefore, not having access to such resources results in social retreat and ‘pretending that they are coping when they are not’ (Chase and Walker, 2012, p. 741). Overall, the parents in their study experienced deep shame and dehumanisation by ‘the media, the general public, by politicians and by the welfare institutions they entered, as a homogenous category of people who were “not bothered”, “spongers”, “scroungers” or “benefit bums”’ (Chase and Walker, 2012, p. 751). Parents felt shame for not being able to provide for their children or maintain social appearances. Others felt disapproval from other people and shamed by the media for being in debt or on benefits. In particular people felt judged in relation to their work history and ‘dehumanised’ in terms of the benefit system’ (Chase and Walker, 2012, p. 746). In a response to feeling and being shamed, participants engaged with notions of ‘pride’, for example, not asking for help or having a strong work ethic. Chase and Bantebya-Kyomuhendo (2014) drawing on global empirical data (including Britain), suggest that the more affluent fail to recognise the importance that those in poverty attach to ‘keeping up appearances’ which serves to reinforce constructions of the poor as wasting money on short term needs. In addition, Chase and Walker (2012, p. 751) found that participants saw their shaming in the context of ‘prevailing “truths” played out in the media, public, political and policy discourses, which governed the attitudes and behaviour of the general public towards them’. These ‘truths’ were consistent with a neoliberal regime of truth which individualises poverty and holds families responsible for causing and solving their own poverty. As argued by Chase and Walker (2012) this dominant discourse of blame serves ultimately to distinguish those deserving of support from those undeserving of support.

### *The abject*

Another way that the underclass has been constructed as ‘other’ is through abjection. Tyler (2013) argues that the abjectification of the ‘underclass’ – how the poor have

become ‘objects of disgust’ has become the mechanism through which neoliberal policy is legitimised. She suggests that the underclass have become ‘symbolic and material scapegoats’ legitimising ‘tough economic measures and punitive governmental response’ (Tyler, 2013, p. 10). Jones (2015, p.x) explains how the word ‘chav’ has become a derogatory term and used in a ‘classist fashion’ to distinguish between the hard-working poor and those who are welfare dependent. He suggests that the construction of the ‘chav’ has become an acceptable form of class hatred which is embedded within social media, mass media and everyday conversations (Jones, 2015, p. 6). Discourses of the ‘underclass’ have intersected with gendered discourses resulting in teenage and lone mothers becoming particularly visible (Allen and Taylor, 2012). Lister (2004, p. 110) argues that, within the discourse, lone mothers are the most ‘vilified members of the “underclass”’. Tyler’s (2008) analysis of the ‘chav mum’ is an example of how young white working-class mothers have been dehumanised and constructed in the media as representative of an underclass. She points out how the ‘chav mum’ is identified as welfare dependent; poor at parenting; promiscuous, often with several children of mixed race; a consumer of branded goods; and embodying ‘bad or vulgar’ taste (Tyler, 2008, p.21). She comments on how the physical appearance of the ‘chav mum’ makes her particularly visible and identifiable. For example, popular UK comedy programmes, such as ‘Little Britain’ and its construction of Vicky Pollard, a fictional ‘chav mum’ figure, have served to reinforce the media condemnation of young working-class white girls and fed a discourse of the underclass.

Tyler (2013) argues that migrants and asylum seekers are another example of abjection. She suggests that the media and political portrayal of the UK as a ‘soft touch’ in regard to immigration has had a negative impact on the experience of migrants and asylum seekers. Following an expansion of the EU in 2004 there has been an increasing move of people to the UK from Eastern European countries, with statistics suggesting that migrants contribute to 11% of the UK labour market (ONS, 2016). As discussed by Rasinger (2010, p. 1022), general levels of high unemployment in the UK have contributed to ‘resentment among parts of the “native” population’ towards EU citizens supported by the media debate around Gordon Brown’s (2007) (then Prime Minister) call for ‘British jobs for British workers’ at the TUC congress in September 2007. Since the vote for Brexit there has been an increasing focus on migration around issues of work, for example, the *Telegraph* headline, ‘Kick out EU migrants after Brexit if they fail to find work’ (Maidment, 2018). In contrast to a media portrayal of a ‘soft touch’

UK, both men and women who are migrants experience disadvantage in terms of work. Mooney et al. (2013), in their study about fatherhood, highlight the difficulties for first generation migrants and their experiences with work. For example, first generation Polish fathers experienced ‘precarious employment conditions’ and low status jobs despite having higher level qualifications. Women who are migrants are also more likely to be in low-paid jobs with poor working conditions and irregular hours (Vargas-Silva et al., 2016). These findings are supported by the ONS (2016) which suggests that most migrants are employed in low-paid jobs with many working longer hours or likely to be in jobs for which they are over-qualified.

*Intergenerational poverty – disadvantage or deprivation?*

Parents in poverty have also been ‘othered’ within a discourse of cultural intergenerational poverty – the idea that poverty is transmitted from generation to generation via lifestyles and values. Gillies (2008, p. 96) argues that the New Labour Government framed parenting as ‘a job requiring particular skills and expertise which must be taught by formally qualified professionals’. She suggested that middle-class parenting practice was held up as ‘good’ practice, whilst the practice of working-class parents was constructed as the opposite. Tony Blair (2006), then Prime Minister, described disadvantage as being transmitted down generations through a ‘cycle of deprivation’. There are strong similarities between Blair’s speech and that of Keith Joseph in 1972, then Conservative Education Secretary, who coined the phrase, ‘cycle of deprivation’, the idea that poverty is intergenerational and transmitted to children via poor parenting, lifestyles and values (Welshman, 2006). Joseph (1972, cited in Welshman, 2006) suggested that changes to parents’ attitude and moral mind-set were required to break the cycle. Welshman (2008, p.83) asserts that the ‘cycle of deprivation’ theory was a ‘gross over simplification’ which was discredited by Berthoud (1983) who analysed government-funded research on ‘transmitted deprivation’ and concluded it was not possible to demonstrate a link between poor parenting and poverty. Berthoud (1983) argued that the reason poverty persisted was not to do with a ‘cycle of deprivation’ and poor parenting but a ‘cycle of disadvantage’ and structural factors, such as low earnings, poor housing, health and educational achievement. Gazeley (2012) argues that intersections with social class, gender and ethnicity are significant when considering how intergenerational disadvantage is perpetuated through education relying unfairly on a deficit discourse. For example, in her study about school exclusion practices, Gazeley (2012, p. 298) found a professional

discourse that ‘sometimes links involvement in school exclusion processes to parental deficit rather than to parental disadvantage’.

Despite the discrediting of a ‘cycle of deprivation’, deficit discourses of poverty have persisted. MacDonald et al. (2013; 2014) have explored ideas relating to intergenerational cultures of worklessness, for example, that parents pass on attitudes and behaviours to their children which encourage ‘welfare dependency’. Despite researching within areas with some of the highest rates of worklessness, MacDonald et al. (2013) were unable to find evidence to support this idea. In contrast to the political and media assumption that there is a culture of worklessness, they found that people without work had a ‘commitment to employment’ and did not want their children to end up in the same situation. MacDonald et al. (2013; 2014) concluded that issues of social structural disadvantage are ignored (such as lack of jobs, low pay and temporary jobs) and instead the ‘myth’ of a culture of intergenerational worklessness is sustained and perpetuated through political rhetoric, popular culture and government policy.

#### *The biologisation of parenting*

Churchill (2013, p. 218) suggests that stigmatising underclass discourses have increasingly pervaded government policy and framed poverty in early childhood around ‘a problem of welfare dependency, poor parenting, psycho-social problems and family dysfunction’. Gillies et al. (2017) argue that an increased government emphasis on early intervention initiatives for children and families reflects a discourse of biologisation of parenting. Gillies et al. (2016) argue that government policies on ‘early intervention’ have been underpinned with dubious evidence from neuroscience which has served to reinforce gendered, classed and cultural inequalities around poverty in early childhood. For example, Gillies et al. (2017) in their critique of Allen’s (2011) government report on ‘Early Intervention: the next steps’, suggests that, unsubstantiated research in neuroscience, is used to support a biologised account of early intervention. Despite the lack of robust evidence to support early intervention, mothers on low incomes have been targeted for intervention and constructed within a deficit model of parenting (Gillies, et al. 2017). In their research project, Gillies et al. (2017) found that discourses of biologisation and early intervention were embodied by early years health care providers and early year educators and were played out in gendered and classed ways, such as targeting parenting interventions aimed to optimise children’s development at pregnant women and new mothers on low incomes. Edwards

et al. (2015, p. 14) argues that both policy and practice suggest that ‘the poor are underdeveloped, that there is something missing from their brains, they do not experience normal emotions, and most powerfully do not love their children like “we do”’.

*Troubling the ‘troubled families’*

Boddy et al. (2016) suggest that there has been an increasing emphasis on family responsibility as a way of addressing poverty since the introduction of the Family Intervention Project model under New Labour in 2009 and the subsequent Troubled Families Programme introduced by the Coalition Government in 2012. The Troubled Families Programme aimed to provide support for families with ‘multiple problems, including crime, anti-social behaviour, truancy, unemployment, mental health problems and domestic abuse’ (Bate, 2017, p. 3). As part of their remit to ‘reduce inequalities in outcomes among young children in their areas’, Sure Start children’s centres were involved in the delivery of the Troubled Families Programme (DfE, 2013a, p. 13), reflecting a shift in policy from universal services to targeted services. The Programme was aimed at turning around the lives of 120,000 families across England who were claimed to cost the government £9 billion a year (DWP, 2012). The Programme followed the riots in England during 2011 which were largely blamed on poor parenting (Leverett, 2014). David Cameron’s<sup>13</sup> speech in 2011, clearly identified families with multiple disadvantages as the cause of problems in society, reflecting a shift away from recognising structural inequalities as factors associated with poverty:

Officialdom might call them ‘families with multiple disadvantages’. Some in the press might call them ‘neighbours from hell’. Whatever you call them, we’ve known for years that a relatively small number of families are the source of a large proportion of the problems in society (cited in Levitas, 2012, p. 6).

As Boddy et al. (2016, p. 276) point out both the Family Intervention Project and Troubled Families agendas ‘single[d] out parents in particular as the (ir)responsible individual’. The pathologising of parents on low incomes within the discourse of ‘troubled families’ reflects how, increasingly, policy has embodied stigmatising neoliberal discourse of individualisation. The government claimed that the Troubled Families Programme was successful, citing significant improvements for families relating to employment, youth crime and school attendance (DCLG, 2016). However, these claims were criticised by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts

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<sup>13</sup> David Cameron was the Prime Minister in the UK from 2010 to 2016



[HCCPA] (2016, p. 6) who argued that evidence was lacking to directly link improvements to the Programme. They argued that a ‘payments by results framework’ had encouraged local authorities to focus on achieving short term goals rather than addressing long term sustainable changes in families’ lives (HCCPA, 2016, p. 6). The use of the term ‘turned around’ was criticised, with HCCPA (2016, p. 6) stating that it was misleading and ‘over stated’ the impact of the programme. As Bate (2017) concludes, there is no evidence so far that the Troubled Families Programme has had a significant impact on its core objectives of employment, benefit receipt, school attendance and safeguarding and child welfare. Wills et al. (2017) suggest that the bringing together of different problems under the umbrella term ‘troubled families’ reflects the ‘discourse of the underclass’ and a ‘cycle of deprivation’. Levitas (2012, p. 5) highlights how there has been a shift in political discourse ‘from families that have troubles, through families that are “troubled”, to families that are or cause trouble.’ Structural factors, such as ill health, poor housing and low income are ignored and instead ‘vindictive attitudes to the poor’ are sustained through the individualisation and moralisation of behaviour (Levitas, 2012, p.8). As Boddy et al. (2016, p. 277) point out policies which construct families as ‘irresponsible’ or ‘broken’ are unlikely to generate ‘approaches to intervention that recognise the complexity and contexts of families’ lives, and the difficulties that families face’.

#### **2.4 Early Years Practitioners and poverty**

Simpson (2013) conducted one of the few studies in England which has explored how Early Years Practitioners understand poverty in early childhood and how this relates to their everyday work. The research is a small-scale study, undertaken with ten preschool practitioners in 2011/2012 working in some of the poorest neighbourhoods in the north-east of England. In contrast with the south-east of England, the north-east experiences some of the highest rates of poverty (Tomlinson, 2018). Consistent with a discourse of an underclass, Simpson (2013) argued that Early Years Practitioners offered individualised causes of poverty, such as inadequate parenting, rather than offering structural explanations of child poverty, such as low pay, insecure work and a lack of jobs. In line with Moss’s (2006) discourse of the ‘technician’, Simpson (2013, p. 92) suggests that the Early Years Practitioners had adopted a ‘performative discourse’ and

were focused on how children in poverty performed in terms of ‘school readiness’<sup>14</sup> and meeting educational targets rather than focusing on their immediate needs, such as children’s well-being. In addition, he found that the Early Years Practitioners experienced tensions between the cost and the quality of provision, for example, how cuts and changes to early years services had impacted on delivering a quality service. He concluded that the Early Years Practitioners in the study had embodied the government’s neoliberal rhetoric, holding the poor individually responsible for their poverty. Thus poverty was ‘normalised’ and considered inevitable ‘when parents lacked aspiration and motivation’ (Simpson, 2013, p. 94).

Simpson (2013, p. 94) suggests there is a disconnect between Early Years Practitioners and parents in poverty. Applying Lister’s (2004; 2015) concept of ‘othering’ to Simpson’s (2013) study it could be argued that the Early Years Practitioners have ‘othered’ parents in poverty through constructing them as poor at parenting. Arguably the ‘othering’ of the parents does three things: firstly, it supports a dominant underclass discourse, in that the poor are not capable of being good parents or managing their money; secondly, it renders structural inequalities invisible; and thirdly, it makes invisible the fact that many Early Years Practitioners are also on low incomes and may be parents in poverty too. Consequently, the responsibility of the poverty is located with the parents rather than society. In Simpson’s (2013) study it could be argued that Early Years Practitioners have embodied neoliberal discourses and that the process of ‘othering’ made it difficult for them to identify with parents in poverty.

## 2.5 Summary

In summary, poverty in early childhood has increasingly been constructed within a discourse of work and an underclass with strong resonance to historical discourses of the deserving and undeserving poor. Although New Labour’s policies to some extent reflected a redistributionist discourse, successive governments have focused on parenting practices reflecting a deficit discourse which is both gendered and classed. Early Years Practitioners have been positioned within policy initiatives to address poverty in early childhood, such as Sure Start and the Troubled Families Programme. However, such programmes have increasingly focused on addressing a cycle of

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<sup>14</sup> Although there is no nationally set baseline in England which defines ‘school readiness’, the term generally refers to being ready to start school (Ofsted, 2014).

deprivation, understood within a discourse of inadequate parenting, rather than tackling structural factors associated with disadvantage. So far there is little evidence to suggest that such policies are making a significant difference to the lives of families. Overall deficit discourses about parents in poverty are pervasive and continue to be a strong policy driver in early childhood.

## **2.6 Research questions**

This study aims to add to the scarce literature about Early Years Practitioners' understandings of poverty and to better recognise the importance of professional and personal experiences in shaping understandings. The over-arching research question of the study is 'How do Early Years Practitioners understand poverty in early childhood?' Underneath this over-arching question are two sub-questions. Firstly, 'How do dominant discourses of poverty shape Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty?' and secondly, 'How does the personal and professional shape Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty?' The first sub-question examines how prevailing discourses of poverty shape Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty and whether or not they have embodied neoliberal ideology as Simpson (2013) suggests. The second sub-question relates to how Early Years Practitioners professional and personal lives have shaped their understandings of poverty.

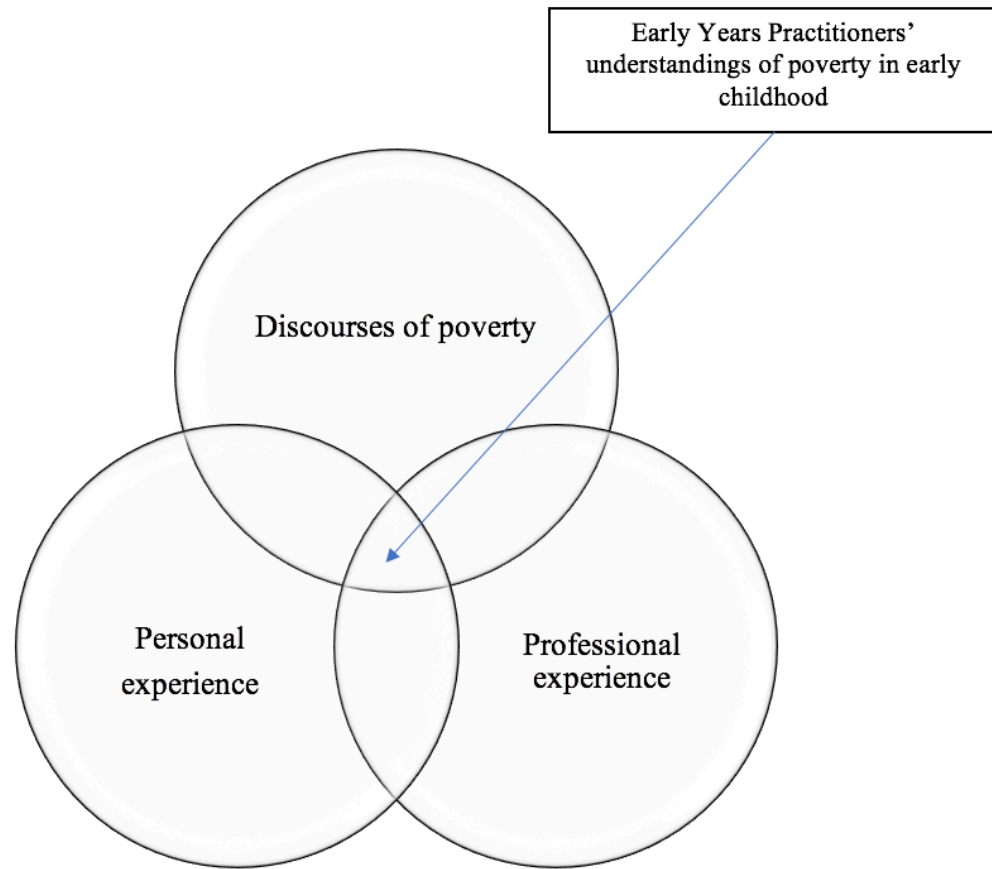
## Chapter Three

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Methodological and theoretical approach

The methodological and theoretical approach of a study is shaped by ontological and epistemological understandings (Dunne et al., 2005). Thomas (2013b, p. 119) describes ontology as ‘what exists in the social world’ and epistemology as ‘the study of our knowledge of the world’. My ontological and epistemological positions have been influenced by my understanding of poverty in early childhood as a social construction shaped by political discourse – dynamic, multi-dimensional and intersectional. This understanding of poverty suggests there are multiple ways that Early Years Practitioners construct their understandings of poverty within the narratives they tell. As such, my research is underpinned by a relativist ontology, in other words, ‘there are multiple constructed *realities*, rather than a single, pre-social reality or mind-independent truth’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.27). My epistemological position is underpinned by ‘constructivism’, in other words, the world is constructed through ‘discourses’ and there is no one discernible truth or way of seeing the world. Consistent with a constructionist approach I have adopted a qualitative narrative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how Early Years Practitioners’ multi-layered meanings of poverty in early childhood are constructed and shaped by dominant discourses and the personal and the professional. Figure 1 illustrates how Early Years Practitioners’ understanding of poverty in early childhood is understood as a series of intersections between discourses of poverty and personal and professional experiences.

*Figure 1: How do Early Years Practitioners understand poverty in early childhood?*



### **3.2 A narrative approach – ‘small stories’**

The narrative approach utilised in this study draws on Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s (2008, p. 381) concept of ‘small stories’ (or ‘narratives-in-interaction’), described as:

a gamut of under-represented and ‘a-typical’ narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell.

The rationale for taking a small story approach is best explained within the context of other dominant narrative approaches, for example, an event-centred approach (such as Labovian). Labov (1997) understands narrative as a structured temporal ordering of events. However, Patterson (2013) argues that people’s narratives do not always follow an orderly structure and retellings of stories are often different. For example, narratives are always in a process of being re-constructed (performed differently each time and co-constructed with others) as a way of human ‘sense-making’ (Squire, 2013). As Georgakopoulou (2014, p.4) points out narratives can be ‘messy’.

In contrast to an event-centred approach, a ‘small story’ approach is not limited to an

understanding of narrative as structured temporal events. Instead, a ‘small story’ approach attends to the inconsistencies and lack of coherence in narratives (Georgakopoulou, 2014). As Phoenix (2013) points out, a ‘small story’ approach also includes attention to past, present and future or imagined events. Small stories are conceptualised as ‘interactive engagements’ where people ‘construct a sense of who they are’ enabling a focus on how characters and the narrator are positioned and how the ‘self’ (or narrator) is positioned with regard to dominant discourses (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 382). Thus a ‘small story’ approach enables attention to be paid to the immediate context of how self and others are constructed, as well as, how narratives are shaped by discourse. As ‘interactive engagements’, they enable the exploration of how Early Years Practitioners construct a sense of who they are and how they position others and themselves in relation to dominant discourses of poverty.

### 3.2.1 I-positions

To understand how Early Years Practitioners construct a sense of themselves and others, I have drawn on Buitelaar’s (2006) understanding of I-positions and the ‘dialogical self’. Buitelaar (2006) suggests that people shift between their different ‘I-positions’ telling stories about their past, future and present as a way of making sense of their lives. For example, an Early Years Practitioner might talk from the position of a mother or a worker. An analysis of I-positions reveals how individuals’ voices may or may not conflict or how one voice or collective voices may dominate. This understanding of a ‘dialogical self’ draws on the work of Hermans (2001, p. 248) who conceptualises the ‘self’ as a ‘dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions’ moving between different spatial positions in time and situation. The dialogical self is an ‘embodied self’, located in a variety of positions. The *I* is able ‘imaginatively’ to give each position a voice, establishing dialogical relations between positions. In other words, the self is ‘multi-voiced’ and the ‘person can act as if he or she *were* the other and other *were* him-or herself’ creating alternative perspectives on the world and self (Hermans, 2001, p. 250).

Buitelaar (2006) uses the concepts of ‘dialogical self’ and I-positions as a way of exploring intersectionality. The term intersectionality was originally used by Crenshaw (1989) to discuss multi-dimensional discrimination experienced by black women in the workplace in the U.S.A. She argued that the intersectional experience, the combined effect of race, social class and gender was greater than the sum of the parts and must be

taken into account to address issues of subordination (Crenshaw, 1989). Phoenix (2006) points out that intersectionality has principally been used to explore how women have been simultaneously positioned in terms of race, gender and social class. Building on the work of Crenshaw (1989), Phoenix (2004, p. 76) defines intersectionality as:

the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue the multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts.

Her definition suggests that intersectionality can be used to explore how any group of people operate dynamically with each other within a specific context making ‘visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it’ (Phoenix, 2006, p. 187).

Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 195), in her critical assessment of additive and mutually constitutive models of intersectional social divisions, argues that political constructions have failed to recognise intersectionality as the ‘dynamic, shifting and multiplex’ intersection of different positions. She argues against an additive model of intersectional social division, suggesting that political constructions of intersectionality have become more fragmented and multiple as identity categories have been added. In addition, she points out that constructs of class, race and ethnicity become ‘naturalised’ discourses within time and place, often treating everyone who belongs to a particular category as the same, defining what is ‘normal’ and what is not or ‘who is entitled’ and ‘who is not’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199). Instead she argues for a ‘mutually constitutive’ model of intersectional social divisions which addresses the ‘specific positionings and (not necessarily corresponding) identities and political values’ and how these are ‘constructed, interrelate and affect each other’ in specific locations and contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 200).

Yuval-Davis (2006) critiques intersectionality in terms of which social divisions should be analysed. She warns against using ‘fixed’ social groupings, such, as class, race and gender as this is inconsistent with intersectionality as a dynamic concept. To address this issue, Tatli and Ozbilgin (2012, p. 181) suggest an ‘emic’ approach to intersectionality, one where:

categories of diversity are emergent rather than pre-determined, and [...] are empirically identified and locally defined according to their role in generating power, privilege, advantage, disadvantage, discrimination and inequality at work.

Their approach affords a move away from an ‘etic’ view of intersectionality, one which has focused on the static and pre-determined categories of difference (transcending time and place) to an ‘emic’, view of intersectionality, which is dynamic and considers the ‘temporal and geographic contextuality of relations of power, privilege, inequality and disadvantage’ (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012, p.181). Buitelaar’s (2006) understandings of the dialogical self and I-positions have been used within the study as a way of dynamically investigating how Early Years Practitioners’ multiple positions may be held in tension and contradiction within a broader context of dominant discourses of poverty. In line with an ‘emic’ approach to intersectionality, categories of difference were not predetermined or relationships of power assumed.

### **3.2.2 Power, truth and discourse**

Foucault’s (1977[1980]) concepts of power, truth and discourse provide a way of exploring how narratives are immersed in relations of power and knowledge. From the field of feminist research, Tamboukou (2013) argues that Foucault’s ideas are compatible with a narrative approach and – rather than being presented as a methodological framework – can be ideas for the researcher to draw on and adapt. For example,

Still I could claim that after all, these were only trails to be followed, it mattered little where they led [...] They were merely lines laid down for you to pursue or to divert elsewhere for me to extend upon or redesign as the case might be. They are in the final analysis, just fragments and it is up to you or me to see what we can make of them (Foucault, 1980, p. 78).

Following Foucault’s (1980) suggestion I have used his concepts of truth, power and discourse to contribute to understanding how Early Years Practitioners have constructed understandings of poverty. Taking a Foucauldian approach to narrative, Tamboukou (2013, p. 92) argues that narratives ‘always emerge in contexts saturated by power/knowledge relations that keep destabilizing their meanings and characters’. Tamboukou (2013) draws on Foucault’s (1988) concepts of technologies of power and technologies of self, and proposes that narratives have a two-fold function: firstly, as ‘technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject’; and secondly, as ‘technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). In relation, to self and other, technologies of power and the self might be understood in terms of how Early



Years Practitioners have been positioned through discourse (a ‘technology of power’) and how they position themselves (a ‘technology of the self’). Tamboukou (2013, p. 97) points out this process is dynamic, with narrative creating ‘multiplicities of meanings’ which connect with ‘discourses and practices’ shaping meanings and perceptions. Therefore, how Early Years Practitioners might position themselves and others within narratives is constituted within a dynamic power/knowledge relationship whereby self and other is in a constant process of being constructed and re-constructed.

### *Regimes of truth*

In Chapter Two it was argued, drawing on Foucault (1977[1980]), that narratives of poverty are shaped by regimes of truth which determine the types of discourses which are accepted and function as true (for example, in policy). As Walton (2012, p.157) suggests, Foucault’s point in relation to knowledge, power and truth is that ‘power cannot exercise itself without reference to domains of knowledge, or regimes of truth (which constitute discourses)’. In other words, there are ‘truths’ that are produced and sanctioned by institutions and used to govern and regulate the field of early years. As discussed in the literature review, discourses around an underclass have been used to justify and sanction the ‘Troubled Families Programme’ (DCLG, 2016). According to MacNaughton (2005, p.20), Foucault (1972) understood discourse as ‘a body of thinking and writing that used shared language for talking about a topic, shared concept for understanding it and shared methods for examining it’. MacNaughton (2005, p.20) goes on to suggest that the ‘shared language, concepts and methods are found in everyday practices and decision-making and in diverse institutional texts, practices and decision-making processes in different societies and different times’. It is these discourses which frame how Early Years Practitioners might ‘think, feel, understand and practice’ (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 20), for example, in relation to poverty in early childhood

### *Surveillance*

One of the ways that ‘regimes of truth’ are brought to life is through Foucault’s (1980) concept of ‘disciplinary power’ which articulates how power is produced at the level of the body:

But in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives (Foucault,

1980, p.39).

Foucault (1975[1979]) describes how ‘disciplinary power’ is exercised through ‘surveillance’ in his analysis of Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ prison design. As discussed in Chapter One, Osgood (2006a; 2006b) draws on Foucault’s (1975[1979]) notion of surveillance to illustrate how mechanisms of power are used invisibly to control Early Years Practitioners through workforce reform and policy so that practice becomes self-regulatory and difficult to challenge. However, the concept of ‘surveillance’ can also be applied to examine how Early Years Practitioners might exercise power over others, for example, the families they work with.

### *Contesting regimes of truth*

Foucault (1971[1984], p. 85) discusses how regimes of truth are subject to ‘violence to be inflicted on violence’. MacNaughton (2005) explains this as the process whereby ‘as one truth accumulates official sanction, others become marginalised and/or silenced’ resulting in the privileging of homogeneity and the marginalisation of diversity. In ‘Discipline and Punish’ Foucault (1975[1979]) presents the body as ‘docile’ in this process, subjugated and controlled by institutions, such as schools. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, regimes of truth might be refused at the site of the subject through the telling of ‘truths’ in everyday life through a process of parrhesia, the act of truth telling or fearless speech (Ball, 2015), or through Davies et al.’s (2005, p. 347) concept of ‘chiasma’, giving rise to new discourses through the ‘possible leakage’ from one discourse into another. These concepts have been used to understand how Early Years Practitioners might contest dominant discourses of poverty and create possibilities for creating new discourses about poverty.

### **3.3 Case study**

In regard to the design of the research a case study approach was used. My initial approach to case study was based on Yin’s (2014) understanding of a case as a real life setting or context. In line with Yin’s (2014) understanding I chose two apparently similar childcare provisions in the south-east of England, both comprised of a nursery school, daycare and children’s centre. The rationale for choosing a case study method was to allow the exploration of Early Years Practitioners’ narratives of poverty in early childhood within a bounded system of time and place. As the study developed it became apparent that the case study was not about the two settings but more about the Early Years Practitioners and their narratives of poverty in early childhood. I drew on Thomas

(2013a) to help re-conceptualise my understanding of case study. Thomas (2013a) makes the distinction between the ‘subject’ of the case and the ‘object’ of the case. He defines the ‘subject’ as ‘persons, groups, time periods, places, events, institutions or any of a range of phenomena that can be studied in their complexity, and, in some sense, their wholeness’ and defines the ‘object’ as ‘the analysis, the theorisation’ (Thomas, 2013a, p.595). In my case study, the Early Years Practitioners were the ‘subject’ (the people that I was studying) and the ‘narratives of poverty in early childhood’ were the ‘object’ (how narratives of poverty in early childhood were analysed and theorised).

One of the common criticisms of case studies relates to whether it is possible to generalise the findings, for example, ‘on the basis of results of our researched case(s), what can be said about non-researched cases?’ (Swanborn, 2010, p. 66). As Swanborn (2010) points out it is rare that enough cases are ever studied whereby inductive statistics for generalisation can be used. However, Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 12) argues that ‘formal generalisation is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas “the force of example” is underestimated’, suggesting that much can be learnt from the intense observation afforded by a case study as opposed to statistical research involving large numbers. Thomas (2016, p.73) suggests that the real contribution that case study has to offer is in terms of the ‘connections and insights it offers between another’s experience [‘horizon of meaning’] and your own’. Thereby the ‘conception, construction and conduct’ of the case study becomes more important rather than issues of generalisation (Thomas, 2016, p. 76). Drawing on these understandings it is argued that a case study approach is consistent with a constructionist approach and affords an in-depth examination of the narratives of the Early Years Practitioners within the settings where the research was conducted. In addition, as advised by Thomas (2016), careful attention was given to the construction of the research questions, design of the research and analysis of the data (as discussed later in this chapter).

### **3.4 Positionality and a reflexive approach**

Within the thesis I have explored my ‘horizon of meaning’ in terms of my positionality and the process of reflexivity. As Reay (1996, p. 443) points out, ‘the difference your differences make’ influences the research process, in other words, how I might construct myself as the same or different from my participants will shape how I construct their narratives and identities. Osgood (2010) explains how our ‘multiple (shifting) identities’ are dynamic and highlights how different aspects of our identity

are held in tension and conflict, such as shifts in class, maternity, age and occupation. She advocates a reflexive and reflective approach at all stages of the research process to address issues of transparency and accountability. Therefore, the I-positions I speak from and how these intersect with categories of division is fundamental to how I understand my self and others within the context of the study.

Feminist research has highlighted the importance of reflexivity. For example, Oakley's (2016) studies of motherhood in the 1970s raised issues about power and the relationship between the researcher and the researched. She highlighted the imbalance of power between the interviewer and interviewee and the lack of reciprocity, for example, 'information passes one way only' (Oakley, 2016, p. 197). As Bondi (2009) points out, Oakley's work made way for new ways of thinking in feminist research and the concept of reflexivity. She points out that engagement with reflexivity is a way of addressing the 'power inequalities that cannot necessarily be overcome, undone or even predicted, but which can be thought about and acted upon' (Bondi, 2009, p. 4). Edwards and Ribbens (1998, p. 4) suggest that social researchers taking a reflexive approach must:

Continually confront questions of the nature and assumptions of the knowledge we are producing, and who we are producing it for.

Who we are and how we situate ourselves makes a difference to the knowledge we produce and how we communicate that knowledge. Therefore, as Hsiung (2008, p. 213) recommends 'turn[ing] the investigative lens away from others and toward ourselves' is critical to reflexivity. Within the thesis I have chosen to use a reflexive approach to examine the impact of social relations between myself and my participants by acknowledging our intersectionality. In addition, I have attempted to make each stage of the research process open and transparent, highlighting the limitations and the 'messiness' of research. However, Osgood (2010) warns that narrative approaches can be intrusive, therefore, it is important to exercise ethics of care to both participants and the researcher. For example, the thought of sharing my personal and professional reflections in my thesis gave rise to a certain vulnerability, such as being judged by others or disloyal to my family. I have been mindful of this in terms of what and how I have shared my personal experiences.

In this section I examine my own 'self' and how this has shaped my understandings of poverty in early childhood. Drawing on Buitelaar's (2006) concept of 'dialogical self'

and intersectionality, my ‘self’ is multiple, intersectional and dynamic, shifting across time and space. At this point in time I might describe myself as female, white British and a senior lecturer working within the field of early childhood. However, in other spaces, for example, talking to friends and family, I might describe myself as a wife, sister, friend, cyclist and cat lover. Reflecting on the past, I might describe myself differently, for example, prior to working in higher education, I was an educational psychologist and before that had worked as a teacher in a number of schools, teaching young children. Arguably my understandings derived from my experience, have been – and continue to be – informed by my multiple professional roles and personal experiences.

Different aspects of my ‘self’ are held in tension and some continue to cause confusion. One such aspect is my social class, for example, how I simultaneously hold positions of working-class and middle-class and how this intersects with being a woman. Both my parents described themselves as working-class and as children lived on council estates. My father worked for the post office and my mother had a range of low-paid part-time jobs. They scrimped and saved to buy their own house, taking out a mortgage in the early 1960s. I would not describe us as being in poverty, however, I was aware that, as young children, money was scarce and can remember sometimes feeling embarrassed or judged about how we presented, such as our old car and second-hand clothes. My parents did not have any formal qualifications, however, they were very supportive of my education. I was the first person in my family to go to university and to qualify as a teacher. Early on in my teaching career I remember becoming aware that my accent, which sounded (to me) ‘working-class’ did not really ‘fit’ with the school I was working in, or with my new colleagues and friends who sounded very middle-class. Consequently, I changed the way I spoke to sound more like them. I am now aware that others may perceive me as middle-class, an academic and a ‘career woman’, as I am married but have no children. However, I still identify strongly with my working-class background and can become emotional and defensive particularly when people fail to recognise or acknowledge structural inequalities within society.

### **3.5 Settings and participants**

As discussed in Chapter One, the two settings, Forestside and Meadowland, were located in the 30% most disadvantaged areas in England, however, Forestside served a relatively more affluent area than Meadowland (HCEC, 2013). Both settings were

similar in size, each employing approximately 40 Early Years Practitioners across the nursery school, children's centre and daycare provision. Some of the participants and provisions were known to me professionally, as I had previously worked with them as a co-worker within the same setting, and others were new to me. I initially approached the settings via the head teacher, the overall manager who gave permission for the study to take place in the setting. Once permission was gained from the head teachers, Early Years Practitioners at both settings were invited to take part. General invitations were extended during staff meetings and consent forms and information sheets were given to the participants. To avoid Early Years Practitioners feeling under pressure to take part, a box was left at each setting for participants to 'post' their consent forms (which I arranged to collect at a later date). All Early Years Practitioners from both sites were invited to take part in the research to try and maximise diversity in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, qualification level, role and length of experience. 38 Early Years Practitioners took part, with 23 participants from Meadowland and 15 participants from Forestside. Overall, the sample was homogenous in terms of gender and ethnicity, however, other aspects, such as age, experience, role and qualifications, were more diverse. Information about the participants is presented in the tables below.

#### *Gender and ethnicity*

All participants ( $n = 38$ ) described themselves as female which was consistent with the early years sector, for example, 98% of Early Years Practitioners are women (DfE, 2014a). However, the sample was not consistent with ethnic diversity in the south-east of England, which overall is 85% White British (Gov.UK, 2018a). All apart from one described themselves as White British. In addition, the ethnicity of the Early Years Practitioners was not consistent with the diversity of children in the settings, for example, although the majority of children were White British there were a number of children from minority ethnic heritage, mainly Central and Eastern European backgrounds.

#### *Age*

Twenty-one out of thirty-eight participants (55%) volunteered information about their age. Overall there was a wide range of ages, with the majority aged between 25 and 64 (see Table 1).

*Table 1: Age of participants n = 38 (100%)*

Age (years)	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	No Information
Nos.	1	4	4	7	5	17

*Qualifications*

In England 77% of Early Years Practitioners hold at least a level 3 childcare qualification and 29% have at least a Level 6 qualification (DfE, 2017b). The participants in this study were more highly qualified than the national average with 35 (97%) holding at least a level 3 professional qualification and 16 (44%) holding a level 6 qualification or above (see Table 2).

*Table 2: Highest qualification n=38 (100%)*

	Level 3	Level 6 (or above)
Number of participants	35 (97%)	16 (44%)
National Average	77%	29%

Overall, those working in the maintained nursery schools held the highest qualifications and those working in daycare the lowest. All managers were qualified to level 6. Differences in qualifications between provisions to some extent reflected the requirement for maintained nursery schools to have practice delivered by teachers with Qualified Teacher Status.

*Professional Role*

Within the participants there was a wide range of roles, which was consistent with the types of provision (see Table 3). Seven participants worked in the Nursery School delivering education and care to children aged three to four years old. Six were teachers with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and one was a Nursery Nurse: although she undertook a similar role to the teachers, she was less qualified (Level 3) and on a lower salary. Both nursery nurses and nursery assistants worked in the daycare provision providing care and education for children from nought to three years, as well as, ‘wrap around’ care (breakfast, lunch, after school and holiday provision). Nursery assistants undertook a similar role to the nursery nurses but were paid at a lower rate. Family support workers and family outreach workers were part of the children’s centres and ran support groups and educational courses for families as well as working directly with

families (including home visits). Family support workers worked with families with higher level needs and family outreach workers worked with families with lower level needs. Five participants were managers of provisions (including the nursery school, daycare and children's centre).

*Table 3: Professional role n = 38 (100%)*

Setting	Maintained nursery school		Daycare		Children's centre		All settings
Role	Teacher with QTS	Nursery Nurse	Nursery Nurse	Nursery Assistant	Family Support Worker	Family Outreach Worker	Manager
Nos.	6	1	8	10	6	2	5

### *Experience*

The number of years Early Years Practitioners had worked at their current setting ranged from one month to 16 years with a mean of 6 years (see Table 4).

*Table 4: Number of years working at the current settings n= 38 (100%)*

Years	< 1 year	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	No information
Nos.	7	15	10	3	1	2

Contrary to a national picture of high workforce turnover (NDNA, 2016) all of the participants (who gave information) had worked in the early years sector for at least a year and 30 (79%) had worked in the sector for six years or more, with a mean average of 16 years (see Table 5).

*Table 5: Number of years working in the early years sector n= 38 (100%)*

Years	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	30+	No information
Nos.	6	6	5	8	5	4	2	2

Overall, the figures suggested that most of the participants were experienced Early Years Practitioners.

### **3.6 Research design**

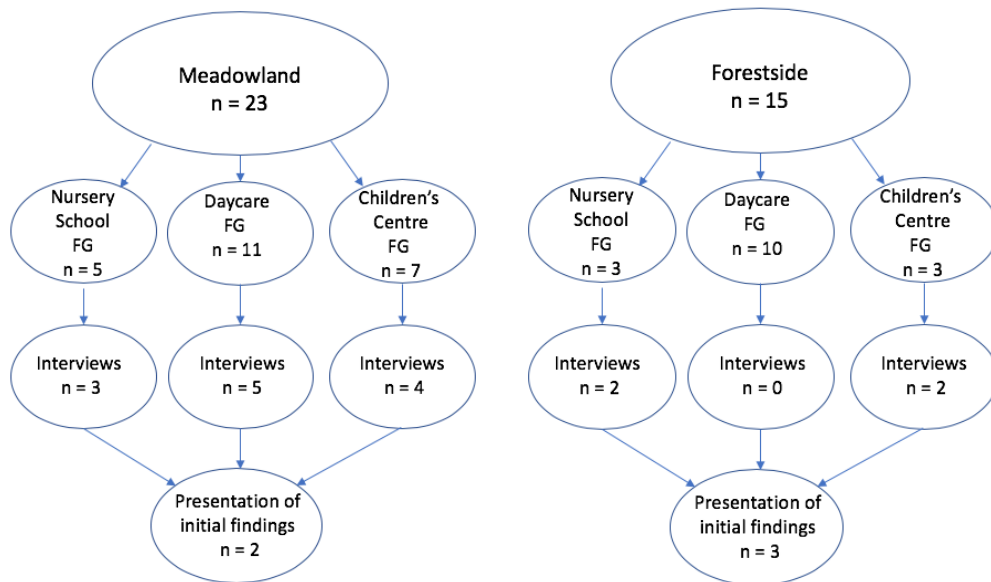
The research design involved multiple methods, both focus groups and interviews. As Robson (2011) suggests, multiple methods are a useful way of addressing different



aspects of the research question. In stage one, focus groups were used to explore how narratives were jointly constructed and how these drew on dominant discourses of poverty. In stage two, interviews were used to explore participants' individual narratives of poverty and how these were shaped by the professional and personal. In stage three, the participants were invited to a presentation of the initial findings, providing an opportunity for them to discuss the findings and highlight what they saw as significant. All participants were invited to take part in all three stages and data collection took place between November 2015 and June 2016. Figure 2 illustrates the stages of the research and numbers of participants at each stage.

*Figure 2: Research design*

*n* = 38



FG = Focus Group

### 3.6.1 Focus group interviews

Savin-Baden and Howell-Major (2013, p. 376) suggest that focus groups are a useful way of exploring a group's understanding of an issue rather than 'individual meaning making'. Informed by Savin-Baden and Howell-Major's (2013, p. 375) understanding of a 'focus group interview' as a 'social interaction' group, members were encouraged to interact with each other, as opposed to answering questions in turn. As Braun and Clarke (2013) point out, a 'focus group interview' is more 'naturalistic' or like a regular conversation: participants may challenge, disagree, agree and ask each other questions. As I was interested in stage one at ascertaining how Early Years Practitioners jointly constructed narratives focus group interviews were chosen as an appropriate approach.

#### *Composition, size and length of the focus groups*

Six focus group interviews were conducted, three in each of the two sites, one with the nursery school, one with the daycare setting and one with the children's centre (see Table 6). As Braun and Clarke (2013) point out, recommendations for the size of a focus group differ. However, overall, a small group is recommended especially in terms of generating a rich discussion and managing the group (Braun and Clarke, 2013). In order to optimise the richness of the data and give ample opportunity for everyone to participate, I planned to have a maximum of six participants in each focus group interview. In reality, it was difficult to manage how many people participated in each group because of constraints around meeting times and not wanting to exclude anyone from participating. Consequently, two of the focus group interviews were much larger than intended (10 and 11 participants) and two groups were smaller (with three participants in each). A limitation of the larger groups was that less people participated in the discussion.

Table 6: Focus group interviews

Site	FG	Setting	Role of participants	Number of participants	Length of FG in minutes
Meadowland	1	Nursery school	4 x teachers 1 x nursery nurse	5	35
	2	Daycare	6 x nursery assistants 4 x nursery nurses 1 x manager	11	37
	3	Children's centre	3 x family support workers 2 x family outreach workers 2 x managers	7	58
Forestside	4	Nursery school	1 x manager 2 x teachers	3	18
	5	Daycare	2 x managers 4 x nursery assistants 4 x nursery nurses	10	12
	6	Children's centre	3 x family support workers	3	45
Total number of participants = 38*					

\*one of the participants took part in two focus group interviews, therefore the overall number of participants was 38.

#### *Role of the moderator*

In each focus group interview I undertook the role of moderator. Braun and Clarke (2013) state that the role of the moderator is to encourage people to talk and facilitate the conversation, rather than control it. I was mindful that poverty might be something which may have affected people personally within the group. Also, I was aware of the unequal power balance within some of the groups, for example, some groups included managers and all groups had participants with a diversity of qualifications. Punch (2002) suggests that presenting a group with an article to discuss is an effective way of exploring sensitive topics or where there might be an unequal power balance. With this in mind a newspaper heading from *The Guardian* (Gentleman, 2015) was used as a

stimulus to prompt an initial discussion about poverty posing the question ‘Is poverty caused by not having any money, or is it the result of lifestyle choices like *unstable relationships* and *debt and addiction*?’ (see Appendix 2). The newspaper article proved to be particularly helpful in generating discussion and was often referred to by the participants at different points in the focus group interview (see Lyndon, 2018, for further discussion).

### *Question guide*

In addition to the newspaper article, a question guide was prepared. Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 117) point out a question guide for a focus group is similar to an interview guide and ‘covers the range of issues that you want the participants to discuss’. It acts as a set of ‘prompts’ to stimulate discussion within the group rather than providing answers for the moderator. The main topics included: causes of poverty and the meaning of poverty within the setting and were supported by further supplementary questions (see Appendix 3).

### *Limitations of the focus group interview*

I had planned to allow an hour for each focus group interview to ensure enough time for participants to explore the topic fully. However, the length of the focus group interviews varied considerably. The shorter focus group interviews reflected some of the difficulties I experienced with arranging the groups and the limited amount of time some groups were able to provide. Despite some focus groups being of shorter length, these still offered understandings of how narratives were jointly constructed and drew on dominant discourses of poverty. However, there was less opportunity for participants to explore issues in depth. Although some of the focus groups appeared similar to ‘real life’, in that participants were talking to each other rather than myself, I was also aware that, particularly in one of the focus groups, the conversation was more stilted and some participants were silent throughout. This particular group had been part of a recent inspection, therefore it is possible that the focus group may have felt like an additional pressure. I was aware that in some focus groups, certain participants seemed to dominate the conversation. Krueger and Casey (2015, p. 121) comment that ‘the dominant talker’ can be a challenge in focus groups and suggest interrupting if necessary. However, Braun and Clarke (2013) point out that a constructionist view takes account of how the data is produced within the context of the focus group. As I was interested in how the narratives were co-constructed within the group the behaviour

of the participants was part of the data generation. Consequently, I decided not to interrupt the participants if they were taking long turns and instead tried to facilitate a discussion by asking questions when the conversation appeared to ‘dry up’. In anticipation of some participants feeling self-conscious about participating in a group discussion a ‘secret box’ was used, adapted from a study by Punch (2002). At the end of the discussion participants were given the opportunity to anonymously add any further comments on a card and post in a box. Two participants chose to contribute in this way.

### **3.6.2 Semi-structured interviews**

In stage two of the research, everyone who had taken part in a focus group was invited to take part in an individual semi-structured interview. Oral interviews are one of the primary methods by which narrative data is collected and analysed (Bold, 2012; Squire et al., 2014; Riessman, 2008). They provide a space to explore the voices of those working in early years settings who are significant by their absence from academic literature (Osgood, 2010). Furthermore, they are ideally suited for exploring both understandings and constructions of topics in which participants have a personal stake (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Therefore, interviews were chosen as an appropriate method to explore Early Years Practitioners’ individual narratives of poverty and how these were shaped by professional and personal understandings of ‘self’ and ‘other’.

#### *Construction of the interview*

There are different ways in which semi-structured interviews might be understood or conducted (Kvale, 2007). Essentially, a semi-structured interview is an everyday conversation with a purpose and a specific approach, in other words it is ‘neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire’ (Kvale, 2007, p. 11). Consistent with my narrative approach I decided to use an interview guide, a list of questions to ask my participants during the interview. Discussing narrative interviewing, Riessman (2008, p. 25) recommends asking questions that ‘open up topics and allow respondents to construct answers in ways they find meaningful’. Consequently, I constructed a small number of questions which were open ended and designed to elicit narratives about poverty in early childhood, for example, when did you first become aware of poverty? (see Appendix 4 for interview questions). Although the questions were similar for each participant they also included questions which referred to topics or opinions which had been expressed in the focus group interviews.

*Number and length of the interviews*

Sixteen participants took part in semi-structured interviews (see Table 7) – twelve from Meadowland and four from Forestside. The length of interviews ranged from 28 to 84 minutes (mean = 48 minutes). Most of the interviews took place in a private room at the participant's place of work and a small number took place at my place of work or the participant's home.

*Table 7: Semi-structured interviews n = 16*

Site	Setting	Role	Number
Meadowland	Nursery school	Teacher x 3	3
	Daycare	Nursery nurse x 3 Nursery assistant Manager	5
	Children's centre	Manager x 2 Family outreach worker x 2	4
Forestside	Nursery school	Teacher Manager	2
	Daycare	n/a	0
	Children's centre	Family support worker x 2	2
Total = 16			

*Relationship between the interviewer and the participants*

Kvale (2007) points out that 'nods and silences' as well as questions contribute to the co-construction of an interview and Riessman (2008) stresses the importance of listening in an emotionally-attentive and engaged way. Throughout the interviews I was aware that I contributed in terms of non-verbal utterances and my body language. For example, the interview transcripts were littered with 'yer yer' and 'em' where I tried to convey to my interviewees that I was listening and interested in what they were saying. Although I was aiming for an interview similar to that of a 'conversation' I was also aware that there was a tension within my role as researcher. Duncombe and Jessop (2002, p. 110) argue that 'doing rapport', by being warm and caring towards a participant in an interview can, on the one hand, encourage participants to talk more freely, however, on the other hand, can present ethical issues of insincerity and 'faking friendship'. They raise issues of 'informed consent', for example, to what extent has a participant given informed consent if they are persuaded to 'participate in the interview

by the researcher's show of empathy and the rapport achieved in conversation' or talk about experiences which they may have preferred to keep private (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002, p. 111). Their advice in addressing these tensions is to 'worry about these issues as they emerge in each piece of research and each individual interview' (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002, p. 111). Before one of my interviews started, one of my participants, who was known to me, wanted to talk about a matter unrelated to the topic so we agreed to do the interview on a different day. In postponing the interview, I was able, to some extent, to draw a boundary around what was the 'interview' and what was 'being a friend' and lending a listening ear. However, I was also aware that the participant may have felt vulnerable because she had opened up to me beyond the scope of the interview and perhaps felt more obligated to help. To address this, I was careful to revisit issues of consent to reassure the participant of what constituted the 'interview' and of her right to withdraw.

#### *Relationship between the focus groups and the interviews*

As mentioned earlier, focus groups were used to explore how narratives were jointly constructed and how these drew on dominant discourses of poverty; and interviews were used to explore participants' individual narratives of poverty and how these were shaped by professional and personal understandings of self and other. However, in reality there was much more fluidity between the two methods. For example, in both focus groups and interviews participants' narratives drew on dominant discourses of poverty and professional and personal experience. However, participants revealed more about their personal lives in the interviews adding greater depth to the data.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was gained from the university in which I worked and the University of Sussex where I was studying in June 2015, prior to data collection. However, as Floyd and Linet (2012, p. 177) point out, gaining ethical approval is like the 'tip of the iceberg' – it is once the researcher is in the field that 'murkier' issues might arise which require consideration. Bold (2012) suggests that there are ethical issues which are particular to the nature and context of the research, as well as issues which are common to all narrative research, such as the role of the researcher, the relationship the researcher has with the participants, and how the voice of the participants is represented. In the following section I address ethical issues of particular significance to the research which arose in relation to my positionality and how this impacted on

more general issues of consent, anonymity and giving voice to my participants.

### **3.7.1 Positionality and insider/outsider research**

Greene (2014, p. 1) defines insider research in simple terms as, ‘that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member’. However, as Greene (2014) points out, a simple definition is ambiguous and ignores the degree to which a researcher might be an insider – in other words, to what extent a researcher might share characteristics or profound experiences with the researched, such as role, working within the same organisation, or personal experiences. Both Greene (2014) and Floyd and Linet (2012) argue that the binary of insider and outsider is false as the researcher may be simultaneously both inside and outside the research. The extent to which I was an insider was complex. In simple terms, drawing on Greene’s (2014) definition, I was an insider in having extensive experience of working as a teacher within the early years setting, including settings which are similar to those of my participants. However, in other ways I was an outsider, for example, a researcher and senior lecturer within a higher education setting. In addition, I had worked with some of the participants who took part in the research and others were unknown to me, potentially making me more of an insider to some than others.

### **3.7.2 Informed consent**

Bold (2012) suggests that ‘informed consent’, ensuring that participants are informed of the benefits and risks involved in taking part in the research, is a common ethical consideration. However, in practice, participants may not always understand the implications of giving consent until after a narrative is shared, therefore, consent should be ongoing throughout the research process. To ensure participants had multiple opportunities to engage with issues of consent the information sheet and consent form were revisited at each stage of the research (see Appendices 5 and 6). Closely associated with informed consent is participants’ right to not take part or withdraw from the research. However, as Brooks et al. (2014) point out, power relations also play out in giving ‘informed consent’. Although taking part in the study was voluntary, and opportunities were provided to opt out at each stage of the research, participants may have felt obligated to take part, particularly in the focus groups, as these occurred during times which were usually allocated to staff meetings. In addition, those participants who were known to me may have felt more obligated to take part because of my ‘insider’ position and wanting to support my research. Certainly, one participant



alluded to this commenting at the beginning of a focus group, ‘you’re a friend and we’re doing it to give you a bit of moral support in something you’re trying to do.’

### **3.7.3 Anonymity**

Anonymity can be problematic particularly if the researcher is known to the organisation where the research is carried out. Consequently, Floyd and Linet (2012) suggest that it is best to assume that the reader will be able to find out the identity of the organisation if they wish and to focus on ‘ensuring that research participants are not identifiable’ (Floyd and Linet, 2012, p. 177). Anonymity of research participants can also be problematic. In the case of my own research, disguising identities by changing participants’ characteristics, such as gender, would have compromised the research, as these were essential to exploring intersectionality. To address this issue participants were given pseudonyms and were not identified in terms of their role or which setting they worked at. Floyd and Linet (2012) suggest that caution should be taken to ensure that participants are not recognisable to each other within the final publication of the research. Again, this is not always easy to achieve, as details may lead to the unintentional identification of a participant. Focus groups require special consideration, as all participants who take part in a group are automatically revealed to each other. Although, participants were asked to maintain confidentiality outside of the group, they were made aware that anonymity and confidentiality could not be achieved within the focus group. However, as Braun and Clarke (2013) point out, participants may choose to break the confidentiality of a focus group, therefore confidentiality cannot be assumed. A further issue for my research was how to protect the recognisability of the families that were discussed in the narratives. Early Years Practitioners talked in some detail about families they had worked with, and some particularly sensitive issues arose in relation to discourses of stigma and shame. Every attempt was made to protect the identity of the families discussed within the narratives, for example, anonymising place names and being careful of how much background and context information was revealed about families. However, as Bold (2012, p. 59) points out it is not possible to ‘account for every possible scenario’ and consequently ensuring anonymity has been a challenge.

### **3.7.4 Reflexivity**

A reflexive approach was adopted as a way of addressing the power inequalities between myself and my participants and I reflected carefully on how to give voice to

my participants in my thesis. As Gready (2013) points out, although narrative research may give the under-represented a voice, they often have little control over how their narratives are presented, interpreted or disseminated as this is often the domain of the researcher. Narrative research provides a way of hearing different people's voices, however, as Bold (2012, p. 61) points out, there are inevitably two research stories:

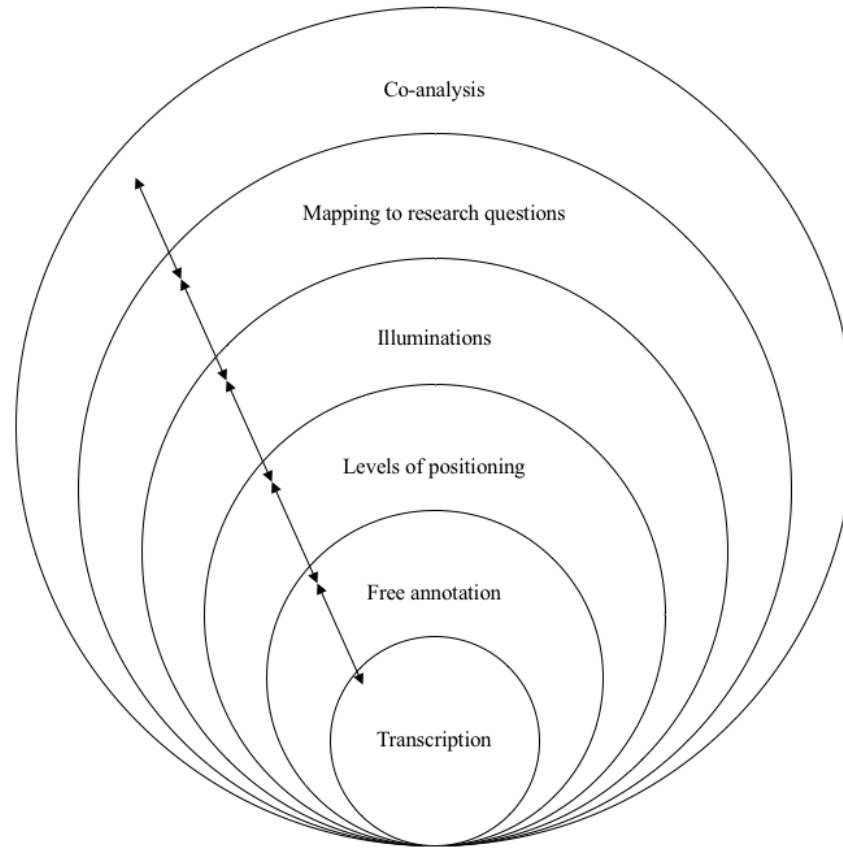
that of the uncensored raw data from participants, which tells its own story, open to interpretation from others; and that of the researcher with the responsibility to present findings from a critical viewpoint.

I was aware of the power inequality between myself and my participants, for example, I had control over how the data was analysed and how my participants were constructed in the writing up of the thesis. As discussed earlier, the importance of reflexivity in action was paramount and as a researcher, I reflected on what I chose to make visible in the analysis of the data. To try and address this, I invited all the participants in stage three of the research to a presentation of the initial findings, providing an opportunity for them to agree or disagree and highlight what they saw as significant. To address issues of anonymity and confidentiality, the presentation of the findings included an overall analysis of the data from both sites and individual comments were anonymised.

### **3.8 Narrative analysis – ‘circles within circles’**

Byrne (2015, p.3) points out that ‘it is the researcher’s responsibility to tell the story of the research, to analyse and to interpret in order to seek and convey its significant messages’. In the next section, I seek to make clear how I analysed and interpreted the data and told the stories. The analytical approach for the study has been termed ‘circles within circles’, a similar approach was used for both the focus groups and interviews. ‘circles within circles’ is presented in Figure 3 and consists of six circles of analysis: transcription; free annotation; levels of positioning; illuminations; mapping to research questions; and co-analysis. Although the diagram starts with transcription, the process was far from linear, evolving organically as my ideas around the process developed. The term ‘circles within circles’ reflects how I often returned to earlier stages of the analytical process, this process of ‘to-ing and fro-ing’ is represented by the double-edged arrows in Figure 3.

*Figure 3: Circles within circles*



### 3.8.1 Transcription

Each interview and focus group was transcribed using a transcription pedal and related software which enabled me to slow down the speed of the interview to capture the utterances of both researcher and participant more accurately. Each transcription was full verbatim capturing pauses, emphasises and non-lexical utterances, such as ‘ums’ and ‘aahs’. However, as Riessman (2008) points out, a transcript, even full verbatim, is only a partial representation of what has been told, the written word on the page does not capture expression, emphasis or the nuances of a conversation. To recall further nuances of the interviews I referred to field notes which were completed after each interview and focus group and were referred to in the analysis. During this first circle, I noted anything which struck me about the interview (see Appendix 7).

### 3.8.2 Free annotation

Drawing on the work of MacLure (2013, p. 228), I wanted to capture the ‘wonder that resides and radiates in data, or rather in the entangled relation of data-and-researcher’.

As MacLure (2013, p. 229) points out, giving attention to ‘wonder’, how ‘we may feel the wonder of data in the gut, or the quickening heartbeat’ gives rise to new interpretations and findings rather than sameness. Therefore, during the ‘free annotation’ circle, sometimes combined with the transcription circle, I aimed to keep an ‘open mind’ to new possibilities and noted anything which particularly struck me about the data.

### **3.8.3 Levels of positioning**

During the levels of positioning a more structured approach was taken which related directly to my research questions. Within this level ‘small stories’ were identified and analysed drawing on Bamberg’s and Georgakopoulou’s (2008) positioning levels and Buitelaar’s (2008) I-positions (see Appendix 8 for an example of a small story and analysis). Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s (2008) ‘positioning levels’, an approach that focuses on the interactive telling of a story comprises of three levels. Level one deals with ‘how characters are positioned within the story’; level two deals with ‘how the speaker/narrator positions himself (and is positioned) within the interactive situation’; and level three is ‘how the speaker/narrator positions a sense of self/identity with regard to dominant discourses’ (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 385). One of the challenges in this phase, as Riessman (2008) acknowledges is establishing the boundaries of a small story. As a researcher, the establishing of what constituted a small story was to some extent a subjective process, such as ‘How long is a small story?’ or ‘Can a small story follow a traditional story structure typical of a Labovian<sup>15</sup> story form?’ However, what was important in taking a ‘small story’ approach was not the structure or the length of the story, but how the approach attends to ‘interactive engagements’, and how Early Years Practitioners ‘construct a sense of who they are’ and position others and themselves (and are positioned) in relation to dominant discourses of poverty. For the purpose of analysis narratives were divided into stanzas or units of meaning (Gee, 1991), which are referred to as ‘small stories’.

### **3.8.4 Illuminations and mapping to research questions**

In the illuminations circle, a summary of each data set was made and links were made to the research questions. An overall mapping grid was created to provide an overview of dominant discourses and how Early Years Practitioners had drawn on their

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<sup>15</sup> Labov (1997)

professional and personal experiences (see Appendix 10).

### **3.8.5 Co-analysis**

In the co-analysis circle (stage three of the research) everyone who had taken part in a focus group and/or an interview was invited to a presentation of the initial findings. The purpose of this stage was not to offer ‘validity’ to my analysis. As Riessman (2008) comments, validity by asking participants to check the analysis is difficult to establish because of the dynamic nature of narrative and how meanings and memories may change over time, for example, for some participants, up to a year had passed since they took part in their focus group or interview. Instead, the group discussion functioned as a contribution to the analysis of the data by providing another layer of meaning and by identifying possible gaps. Five participants attended the presentation, two from Meadowland and three from Forestside. Separate meetings were arranged for each site to protect participants’ anonymity. During the meetings, I presented participants with an A3 sheet of the initial findings (see Appendix 11). Participants were asked to comment on which findings they found the most thought-provoking and which ones either chimed or did not chime with their experiences. Overall participants agreed with the initial analysis and the points which were raised in each group were similar. Participants made specific reference to social class which was missing from my initial findings. To address this, I included reference to social class in my analysis of discourses of poverty in Chapter Four. The level of participation for stage three of the research was low compared to the number of participants overall. Consequently, the views which were expressed at this stage cannot be taken as representative of everyone who took part in the research.

### **3.9 Presentation of the data chapters**

The findings of the data analysis have been presented in two chapters. The first chapter addresses the research question, ‘How do dominant discourses of poverty shape Early Years Practitioners’ narratives of poverty?’ and the second chapter addresses the research question, ‘How does the personal and the professional shape Early Years Practitioners’ narratives of poverty?’ One of the challenges of writing the data chapter was how to preserve the richness and integrity of the narratives, particularly with the amount of data collected. To address this the chapters have drawn across the data set and direct quotes from participants have been used to support the findings. Direct quotes have been carefully edited to try and preserve the integrity and thread of the

narratives using a series of symbols to indicate where some of the narrative has been omitted and a bold font where participants have emphasised words (see Appendix 12 for further explanation).

## Chapter Four

### Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty

‘And yet we punish poverty as if it were a crime, and honour wealth as if it were a virtue’ Charles Gildon (1702)

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings related to the research question, ‘How do dominant discourses of poverty shape Early Years Practitioners’ narratives of poverty?’ The three sections focus on: narratives of stigmatisation, surveillance and fitting in; narratives of work and welfare; and narratives of the ‘curve ball’. Pervading the narratives are small stories about parents and parenting which reflect discourses of the deserving and undeserving poor demonstrating a complexity of morality, motherhood (fatherhood) and parenting and how this becomes bound with poverty.

#### 4.1 Narratives of stigmatisation, surveillance and fitting-in

Lister (2004) argues that a process of ‘othering’ has legitimised the discourse of the underclass through the way that political rhetoric, policy and the media has served to stigmatise and shame the poor. In this section, a series of small stories are discussed which illuminate how many of the Early Years Practitioners drew on moral discourses of poverty which serve to other parents in poverty through practices of stigmatisation, surveillance and shaming. In contrast, a smaller number of Early Years Practitioners told stories which served to contest an individualised discourse and reframe materiality and consumerism as parents ‘trying to fit in’ and avoid the shame and stigma of poverty.

##### 4.1.1. Stigmatisation

Goffman (1968, p.12) refers to stigma as ‘possessing an attribute’ which makes someone ‘different from others in the category of persons available for [them] to be, and of a less desirable kind’. In many of the small stories the Early Years Practitioners talked about stigmatising attributes of those in poverty related to behaviour, physical appearance and material objects. For example, Heather, in her individual interview, talks about how some families prioritise status goods over basic necessities.

Heather: But I think for some lifestyle choice, it’s like they – a lot of parents live beyond their means. [...] And it’s like actually, is

that a necessity? [...] ‘Is it a priority to have Sky?’ ‘Well yes, I want to watch all my programmes.’ ‘But have you got enough food – enough money to pay your rent?’ ‘Er – no.’ [...] It’s materialistic, isn’t it? [...] Actually, is it needed? Do you need it? No. [...] But they don’t see it like that. [...] They see it as their priority. It’s a priority to have a brand new phone. [...] It’s a priority to have the internet and to have Sky TV.. [...]

Heather constructs the parent in poverty as an excessive consumer of goods and services (for example, having Sky TV and a new phone) rather than prioritising absolute needs (such as food and paying rent). Her construct of the parent in poverty is reminiscent of Tyler’s (2008) analysis of the ‘chav mum’, a consumer of branded goods. At the end of the small story, Heather uses the third person to refer to the parent ‘they don’t see it like that’, suggesting an ‘othering’ of the parent in poverty who prioritises the wrong things. Heather’s small story reflects a neoliberal discourse and an individualising of poverty in that the parent is held responsible for her poverty because of prioritising consumerism over basic necessities.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the ‘cycle of deprivation’ (Blair, 2006; Joseph, 1972, cited in Welshman, 2006) is the idea that poverty is intergenerational and transmitted to children via poor parenting, lifestyles and values. Grace tells a small story which is reminiscent of this in her focus group, for example:

If mum’s expectations are quite low i.e. it’s okay not to work and then that then gets passed onto the children it’s like dominoes it goes on and on and that vicious circle [...]

Her reference to a ‘vicious circle’ of how parental low expectations ‘gets passed onto the children’ lends support to a stigmatising discourse of a ‘cycle of deprivation’ and parental deficit, whilst issues associated with disadvantage, such as low earnings, poor housing, health and a lack of educational opportunities go unrecognised.

McGuinness (2018) reports that 67% of children in poverty live in families who are in-work. In addition, Davis et al. (2018, p. 3) found that ‘lone parents and work-age households with little or no work’ have been particularly affected by changes to benefits (such as the introduction of Universal Credit, the benefit cap and two child limit). Some Early Years Practitioners told stigmatising stories about parents’ inability to manage and prioritise money. For example, Abi, in her individual interview talked about how some parents ‘think they’re entitled’ to a certain lifestyle resulting in further financial difficulty:



Abi: And that parent in particular actually [...] said to me, 'But why don't I deserve a holiday?' You know? [...]. So she went on a holiday when- a- and then came back and said, 'Oh I don't have enough money for my rent this month.' [...] You know, [...] and she went, 'Yeah, but I deserve a holiday because, you know, I work hard [...] you know, I've got two children and I [...] you know... got a full-time job [...] and why shouldn't I have a holiday?' So some people almost think they're entitled to it and- rather than actually prioritising.

Here Abi makes a distinction between 'entitlement' and 'prioritising', suggesting that this parent is prioritising the wrong things, such as a holiday over paying her 'rent'. However, Abi does not address the challenges for a working parent and issues of relative poverty, such as high levels of in-work poverty and instead focuses on the inability of the parent to manage and prioritise.

Although participants did not refer directly to the Troubled Families Programme (DCLG, 2016), some referred to stigmatising attributes associated with families with 'troubles', such as addiction (as discussed by Levitas, 2012). For example, Heather and Sally in their focus group, suggested that the introduction of Universal Credit (Gov.UK, 2017a) would make it particularly difficult for parents with 'addictions' to manage:

Heather: But then parents if they like struggle with money if they've got addiction or anything like they're

Sally: Going to find that more difficult to manage

Heather: [...] find it more difficult to manage and we're going to have more people going 'We've got no money for our rent, we've got no money for food we've got yer.'

Under Universal Credit families receive a monthly lump sum of all their benefits and are expected to budget and arrange direct payments accordingly (Gov.UK, 2017a). Universal Credit was criticised on national media sites, such as *The Guardian*, at the time of the focus group for delays in payments (Butler, 2015) and subsequently for causing more poverty (Toynbee, 2018). On the one hand, Heather and Sally's argument is reminiscent of media criticisms at the time that Universal Credit will make it more difficult for families to manage. However, at the same time, they draw on a stigmatising discourse of families with 'troubles', for example, how parents with money or addiction problems will find it more difficult to manage.

Other small stories demonstrated how Early Years Practitioners constructed some parents as at fault and others not at fault, suggesting an awareness of how parents are

blamed on some occasions but not others. For example, Eve commented in the focus group about how some parents get in a financial ‘mess’ trying to provide for their children:

Eve: We see [...] parents not managing their money well enough sometimes (.) trying to do it in favour of the children it’s not necessarily (.) making lifestyle choices for themselves, although sometimes I think that is the case, but sometimes trying to provide things for their children but maybe not planning, not budgeting or buying the wrong things [...] and getting themselves in in a mess.

On the one hand, Eve judges the parents for ‘not planning, budgeting or buying the wrong things’ whilst at the same time making a distinction between parents who make lifestyle choices for themselves or parents who are trying to provide for their children. Here she seems to draw on a moral discourse of the parent, for example, the working-class mother who is judged for providing ‘inadequate norms of care’ for her child (as discussed by Vincent et al., 2010). Although she offers some sympathy for parents who are trying to provide for their children, her narrative overall reflects an underclass discourse of parental deficit and stigmatisation and does little to recognise structural inequalities, such as low incomes.

#### 4.1.2 Fitting-in

Ball (2015) discusses how prevailing discourses can be contested by ‘parrhesia’ (the practice of truth telling or fearless speech). In contrast to the small stories that reflected the stigmatisation of those in poverty, there were a small number that served to challenge such discourses directly. For example, Audrey, in her individual interview, talks about why some parents might prioritise buying a smart phone for their child as a way of ‘fitting in’ and avoiding judgement:

Audrey: And it’s not ‘cause, you know, they’re on the fiddle or because benefits is the life of... [...] It’s because they feel the need to fit in with everybody else. Because people talk to them like they’re crap and people look down on them. It’s almost that having the need to have things to represent their family. ‘Well look, my child’s not gonna be left out. My child’s going to school with an iPhone.’ [...] No-one can say I’m not a good mum. My kid’s got everything he’s ever asked for.’ [...] But that fam- that mum might go without food to pay that bill.

In contrast to the last small story which finds the parent at fault for making a ‘life style choice’, Audrey challenges the misconception that parents who buy status goods are on the ‘fiddle’ and instead suggests that buying status goods is a way of addressing the shame associated with poverty. In her small story the parent goes without food so she

can buy her child an iPhone in order to be a ‘good mum,’. On the one hand, she draws on discourses of absolute poverty, and the increase in food poverty (Lambie-Mumford, 2015; The Trussell Trust, 2017; Knight et al., 2018). On the other hand, she alludes to the importance of ‘keeping up appearances’ (as discussed by Walker and Chase, 2014) and the shame parents might feel for not being able to provide for their children. At the end of the story, Audrey points out that, despite the attempts the parent makes to avoid judgement and distance herself from those in poverty, her efforts are in vain:

Audrey: But it’s about how they think other people see them and judge them I think a lot of the time. [...] That they think ‘well if I’ve got that then it’s gonna make me feel better. It’s gonna make me look better.’ And it becomes about that- that material want for things. And actually, they probably don’t feel any better and it doesn’t change anything apart from give them more debt and push them even further down into poverty. Which is quite sad.

In this account, the parent’s attempt to ‘keep up appearances’ and ‘fit in’ are considered to be counter-productive and result in further debt, stigma and judgement. However, rather than judging the parent at this point, Audrey sympathises with the parent and how their misconceived actions leave them open to stigmatisation rather than sympathy for their situation

Participants provided further examples of how parents are under pressure to ‘fit in’ and the importance of keeping up appearances whilst struggling to meet children’s needs. For example, Christina, Diana and Abi, in their focus group, talk about the pressures for parents to provide the ‘right bag’, pay for school trips and bring in nappies:

Christina: But then I think that some parents you see do feel that slight bit of almost peer pressure you know when they come in the room and they’ve bought a plastic bag and they see all the brand new ruck sacks and the next thing you know they’ve gone out and got a ruck sack [...] and they might not have any money left do you know what I mean? [...]

Diana: All the letters from school ..always said at the bottom that if sort of you have problems paying us or whatever please come and talk to us.. how many parents are actually going to turn up at an office in a school and talk to a secretary and go, ‘I’m really sorry I got this letter I really don’t know how I’m going to pay for it’. ..How **difficult** is that going to be for a parent? [...]

Abi: But it’s like nappies when we say, ‘Oh they’re out of nappies’ and actually to you that’s just a casual, you know question, ‘Do you mind bringing nappies in tomorrow?’, but actually [for] some of our parents do we know what we’re asking? You know some parents **really** struggle to get nappies, I mean nappies are

not cheap.

In the first part of the small story, Christina talks about how parents feel under ‘peer pressure’ to buy a ‘brand new ruck sack’ when their child starts attending the daycare provision. Her comments are consistent with Ridge’s (2011) finding that certain commodities are important in terms of children [and parents] ‘fitting-in’ and avoiding shame and stigma, such as having the ‘right bag’. In the next part of the small story Diana alludes to the shame of asking the school for financial assistance illustrating Chase and Walker’s (2012) finding that those in poverty in response to feeling and being shamed engage with notions of ‘pride’, for example, not asking for help. In the final part of the small story Abi talks about how asking parents to bring in basic items, such as nappies, can shame and embarrass parents in poverty. Her comments suggest that it is easy to overlook the poverty experienced by some parents. Overall, the small story illustrates the difficult choices faced by parents whilst at the same time contesting the stigma that those in poverty are unable to budget or manage their money.

Lister (2004, p.118), drawing on the work of Goffman (1968), suggests that where the ‘stigma of poverty is internalized, shame is a likely consequence’, resulting in the concealment of poverty. For example, Becky and Iris in their focus group, talk about how parents try to hide their poverty and the fear of being ‘found out’:

- Becky: Then you’ve got very hidden poverty of people [...] that seem to be coping really well but that aren’t and you know they might have lots of children, they might only have one but the thing is they’ve got into debt or they’ve got you know other kind of money problems and they’re ashamed and embarrassed [...]
- Iris: And maybe struggling without sharing being able to share anything [...]
- Becky: And then there’s this kind of fear of being found out because you think it’s your fault and you think people are going to comment on that and think that you are a bad parent or a bad person because that’s happened to you and I think that’s a **big thing**.

More than other participants, Iris and Becky show an awareness of how the emotional experience of poverty, such as shame and embarrassment, can impact on families’ lives. For example, rather than endorsing a moral discourse of an underclass they empathise with the parents, demonstrating an understanding of the causes of their shame and how this translates into a fear of being ‘found out’ and labelled as a ‘bad parent’.

#### 4.1.3 Surveillance or support?

Clarke (2006) suggests that, although children's centres promoted 'good parenting' they also provided effective 'surveillance' particularly of mothers. Foucault's (1975[1979]) concept of 'surveillance' is highly relevant to understanding these aspects of the Early Years Practitioner's role. In contrast to the stories where participants demonstrated their empathy for families trying to 'fit in', there were several stories which reflected how Early Years Practitioners put families under 'surveillance', for example, checking up on parents. Chloe and Christina, in their focus group, talked about how parents perceived them as authority figures:

- Chloe: One of my families, the parent [...] brought in a bag of new clothes that she'd just been out and bought for her little girl and to **me** it .. because I did a home visit at that home so I'd seen where they live [...] she didn't need to bring them in and get them all out but [...] just felt like look I am able to buy her clothes and these are new and [...] I don't need ..help you know [...]
- Christina: And we are perceived as sort of an authority type figure
- Chloe: Exactly yer
- Christina: [...] I think they do [...] need to almost justify themselves to us ...and I suppose because we do talk to them about certain personal matters you know they do trust us and they share a lot but think there is always that little part of them that wants to make a good impression and doesn't want us perceiving .. anything negative in the slightest ... whether it's unintentionally or not [...]

In this small story, Christina and Chloe allude to the tension between how, on the one hand, parents might perceive them as 'authority figures', whilst on the other hand, parents are expected to be open with them. Their comments reflect ideas of surveillance, in the sense that the parent feels she is being watched by the Early Years Practitioners and that a judgement is being made. Drawing on De Certeau's (1984) concept of subverting mechanisms of control, the parent attempts to subvert the gaze of the practitioner by presenting as if she was coping, for example, bringing in the bag of new clothes. However, Chloe makes it clear that she is not deceived, declaring that, 'I've seen where they lived'. Here the use of the pronoun 'they' suggests a further distancing between Chloe and the parent. In the final sentence of the story, Chloe talks about how the parent 'doesn't want us perceiving...anything negative', in a similar way to the last small story (Becky and Iris), she alludes to the stigma and shame of poverty and the fear of being 'found out'.

The Early Years Practitioners were not unaware of the tensions between their roles of ‘surveillance’ and ‘support’ and how these played out with their relationships with parents. For example, there seemed to be a tension between placing parents under surveillance and attempts to form trusting relationships. This is illustrated in the focus group when Abi tells a small story about home visits:

Abi: For example, a child coming in without socks on we could [...] we could jump to the conclusion and think, ‘Oh obviously you don’t have enough money for socks’ [...] or it could just be almost like a sign of neglect so the parents had you know all the money in the world but they’re choosing not to or just don’t even think about putting socks on their child [...] And that’s why we tried to introduce the home visits because they’ve been so beneficial to kind of give us a real taste of [...] their home life and we’ve found that they’ve really been able to open up a little bit more than they would .. in our setting because it’s you know more comfortable environment but em .. I think it’s really difficult to make that judgement when you just don’t know the bigger picture [...] there’s so many factors to consider.

For Abi the home visits appear to have two functions, on the one hand, enabling parents to ‘open up a little bit more’, and on the other, providing a ‘taste of home life’ to make a ‘judgement’ about whether parents might be in poverty or rather than simply neglecting their children. At the same time Abi acknowledges the difficulties of making such judgements without knowing the ‘bigger picture’. Her small story reflects the tensions between trying to support parents in poverty whilst at the same time looking for signs of neglect.

Osgood (2006b, p. 8) discusses how emotion is fundamental to the work of Early Years Practitioners, for example, ‘practitioners make considerable personal and collective investments in contributing to and achieving a culture of care’. Towards the end of the focus group, Abi and Diana tell a small story about how they are there to ‘help and support’ parents and some of the challenges this presents for both practitioners and parents:

Diana: I’ve got a family, at first I thought she was really open [...] and all of a sudden now she’s been with me for a few weeks and she’s starting to talk more and there’s more coming out ..and this is a family that look amazing and beautifully presented ...but there doesn’t seem to be a big variety in clothes.. the clothes seem to be the same ones, over and over again [...] and I know that there’s [...] very low-paid jobs involved and things, so its ..it’s starting with mental health issues and yet there’s someone that’s presenting as you never think there was a problem ...just starting to think that [...]

Abi: I need help and that’s a problem you know because we have got the help

and support and we kind of do try and stress to our parents that ..you know do speak to us we will try and help when we can... But some to actually put your hand up and say I need help is really difficult.

Diana talks about how she thought the parent was ‘really open’ until she started to notice the signs that things were not quite how they appeared, for example, wearing the same clothes, the low-paid jobs and disclosure of mental health issues. Together Diana and Abi problematise the role of the Early Years Practitioner, recognising that, on the one hand, it is difficult to know whether a parent needs support, but at the same time, acknowledging how difficult it is for parents to ask for help. These issues are reminiscent of Chase and Walker’s (2012) study and how those in poverty, as a response to feeling and being shamed, are unlikely to admit they need support.

In contrast to small stories about ‘pride’ and not asking for help was a small story told by Christina and Pam in their focus group about parents who do ask for help but ‘lack pride’.

- Christina: Er well em I’m probably talking out of turn here but I mean...when I ..but.. the parents that will typically come forwards are the parents that feel that it’s almost an entitlement to have that help [laughs] so they’re the ones that are coming and saying ‘everything’s terrible.. what can you do? Can I have that loan again?’
- Pam: [...] like you say there are people who are clued up and know exactly what they’re able to get and what they are entitled to or
- Christina: And they almost don’t have that pride factor you know it’s a... [...]
- Pam: Yet some people that are struggling but are not necessarily saying anything that are at breaking point .

Christina describes the parents who typically ask for help as having a sense of ‘entitlement’, appearing to shame the parent for asking for help in the wrong way. Her comments seem to reflect an underclass discourse and Tyler’s (2008) analysis of the ‘chav mum’ as welfare dependent and undeserving of help. Thus, for some Early Years Practitioners it appeared that there are right and wrong ways to be poor, and that a lack of shame and sense of entitlement is the ‘wrong way’.

#### **4.1.4 Reflections**

Lister’s (2004; 2015) understanding of ‘othering’ and associated processes of stigmatisation and shaming helps to explain how Early Years Practitioners socially

distance themselves from parents in poverty and perpetuate a dominant discourse of the underclass. To a large extent parents (mothers) were stigmatised in participants' narratives for their behaviour and appearance particularly relating to buying choices and mismanagement of money drawing on stigmatising constructs of the 'chav mum' and 'troubled families'. However, a small number of stories challenged a dominant discourse of an 'underclass' by revealing understandings of how Early Years Practitioners empathise with parents in poverty. Rather than shaming parents for their poverty these stories revealed ways in which parents try to 'fit in' and appear as if they are coping to avoid the stigma and shame of poverty revealing a more nuanced understanding of poverty. Early Years Practitioners' stories also reflected tensions between their roles of surveillance and support revealing how these can create barriers for both practitioners and parents, for example, expecting parents to open up to them whilst at the same time judging them. Finally, complex and paradoxical understandings were revealed about how Early Years Practitioners expected parents to ask for help even though these intersected with processes of shaming and fed into discourses of the deserving and undeserving.

## **4.2 Narratives of work and welfare**

As discussed in Chapter Two, post 2010 changes in government have seen a shift from a discourse of 'welfare to work' to a discourse of 'work always pays'. In contrast with New Labour's approach of transferring incomes to poorer families via tax credits, the Coalition (and later the Conservative) Government under the title of 'social justice', aimed intensive support and services at the most disadvantaged to support families into the labour market (Simpson, 2013, p. 87). In the next section a series of small stories are discussed which illuminate how Early Years Practitioners drew on discourses of work and welfare which served to challenge discourses of 'work pays', raising issues of: precarious work ('crap jobs'), childcare, benefits, contradictions ('you're damned if you do and damned if you don't'), the working mother and the working migrant father.

### **4.2.1 'Crap jobs'**

Part of the Coalition Government's strategy to address poverty was to ensure that 'work always pays and is seen to pay' (DWP, 2010, p. 1). As discussed in Chapter Two, pressure to take a job can lead to more insecurity and little financial reward (Rabindrakumar (2018), for example, the precarity afforded by zero-hours contracts. Some Early Years Practitioners, such as Jackie and Iris, in their focus group,



highlighted the challenges for parents in terms of ‘making work pay’:

Jackie: And the annoying thing is that politicians talk about getting parents back to work as though they’re all going to go into a lovely career on a good salary that they’re all professionals but most of them go into crap jobs with low pay and horrible hours you know and they just never mention that do they?

Iris: Things like zero hour contracts ...but you can’t turn round to the nursery school and say, ‘Oh I know I’ve paid for daycare but actually McDonalds isn’t busy today so they’ve sent me home so actually I don’t want to pay you’, because the nursery school would say, ‘Terribly sorry you’ve got a contract with us and you’ve got to pay us’.

Jackie contests the government’s political discourse about work, her use of strong language, (‘crap jobs’ and ‘horrible hours’), suggests the strength of her feelings towards the political rhetoric around ‘making work pay’. Iris builds the narrative discussing the unfairness of work practices for a parent on a ‘zero-hours contract’ where the parent ends up paying needlessly for childcare. The experience of parents working in ‘crap jobs’ is contrasted with others who have ‘a lovely career on a good salary’. Here Jackie’s comments suggest her awareness of issues of structural inequalities relating to the experience of work.

#### 4.2.2 Childcare

Aldridge et al. (2012) report that the impact of high childcare and housing costs and too few hours make it difficult for many families to move out of poverty. Participants narratives reflected these issues revealing how childcare and work impact on family life. For example, Diana, in her individual interview talks about working and childcare:

Diana: I think there’s quite a lot of that that goes on children being passed around because people can’t afford to pay nursery fees ... you have them one day [...] auntie has them another day and do two days at nursery [...] the continuity for the children isn’t great always

S: And what do you think the impact on the children then would be?

Diana: I think that they’re very confused little children who don’t quite know where what the rules [...] one house you’re allowed to jump on the sofa one you’re not [...] Get home to mum who’s tired [...] she’s thinking ‘I’ve still got the washing to sort out’ [...] puts child to bed then does everything else [...] and mum’s parents are just burning out [...] and then you’re worrying ‘Can we afford to do this can we afford to do that [...] got to pay the nursery bill’ [...] I think there’s a large amount of families like

that [...] we wouldn't consider to be in poverty because I think there's still a traditional thing of poverty of families not working living in a poor housing I think there's a lot of working families in their own houses that are struggling.

Diana's small story illuminates the impact of high nursery fees and low wages on families and children. She challenges the stigmatised media representations of families in poverty who do not work, for example, the mother is constructed as hard working and trying to manage complicated childcare arrangements whilst the children are constructed as victims of their circumstances, confused by the different care arrangements. On one level the story reflects a moral discourse of the deserving poor, the hard-working family who are striving to make a living (Millar and Ridge, 2013). However, on another level, the story challenges the discourse of the underclass by illustrating how poverty is not just the preserve of those on benefits but also the preserve of those in work on low wages struggling to meet high housing and childcare costs.

#### 4.2.3 'Damned if you do and damned if you don't'

In contrast to Early Years Practitioners who highlighted issues for working families, there were a smaller number who talked about issues for families who were living on benefits. As discussed in Chapter Two, Millar and Ridge (2013) highlight the difficulties for lone mothers moving into work after living on benefits and how living on a low income and the experience of financial insecurity often continues after entering employment. In the next small story, Audrey, in her individual interview, talks about the challenges of getting a job for families who are on benefits.

Audrey: I think the system can be quite disempowering because [...] it doesn't allow you [...] a couple of months to get yourself straight money-wise. If you go to the Job Centre... and say 'Okay, I've got a job now'... they go 'Okay, we'll stop your money.' And that's it. So you could get your money stopped and then have to work a [...] month in hand. And then there's no money for your kids. [...]

But I think that it's really difficult because [...] they're damned if they do and they're damned if they don't. Because if they do make it a [...] generous system then people... won't ever come off benefits because actually they're doing okay. But then when they put sanctions on like they have... actually it just causes [...] this panic and, you know, money's dropped and then people feel really depressed and can't meet their kids' basic needs. And then it's really difficult to think about going back to work and [...] getting a job when, you know, you're faced with 'Actually I'm not gonna get any money on Monday 'cause I've been hit by the benefit cap.'

Audrey highlights the difficulties faced by families making the transition to work by giving voice to a hypothetical conversation between the parent and the job centre worker. Rather than ‘othering’ the parent she ‘others’ the job centre worker, presenting them as showing a lack of concern for the parent who has her benefits stopped before she receives her wages. On the one hand, she empathises with the parent, highlighting the barriers of getting a job, contesting the discourse that work pays by highlighting issues of the lower benefit cap<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, she sympathises with the government, suggesting they are ‘damned if they do and damned if they don’t’: if benefits are too lenient than families become dependent; if sanctions are too harsh, then families are unable to provide for their children’s needs. Here, she engages with the government’s argument that over generous benefits are likely to trap parents in ‘a state of welfare dependency’, whilst at the same time contesting the government’s punitive measures, such as benefit caps.

Other small stories illuminated cases of ‘you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t’, in relation to parents. For example, in her individual interview, Abi, tells a small story about the dilemmas for parents with young children and work:

Abi: I’ve always said [...] I don’t know what I would do if I had children ... because it’s kind of a catch-22. Put your children in nursery to go to work and then all your money that you’re earning goes on nursery fees. So you kind of almost think what is the point? Almost then I don’t think I would be able to work if I had children. [...] so then I would be unemployed. And then would you look and think ‘Oh you’re unemployed’, [...] ‘Are you in poverty then?’ [...] Erm – it’s a difficult one.

Abi uses her imagined I-position of a mother and talks about the difficult choice (a ‘kind of catch-22’) between working or relying on benefits. As a mother with young children she conflates poverty with both working and not working, suggesting a ‘lose-lose’ situation, for example, suggesting that whether or not she works she is likely to be financially insecure. Here she contests the government rhetoric that ‘work always pays and is seen to pay’ (DWP, 2010, p. 1).

#### **4.2.4 The working mother**

Successive governments have supported getting mothers into work as part of their

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<sup>16</sup> The benefit cap is the amount of benefit and tax credit income that an out-of-work household can receive. The benefit cap was lowered in 2016 (Commons Select Committee, 2017).

strategy for welfare reform (Millar and Ridge, 2013). Although not working was judged negatively by the participants, working too much was also judged negatively. For example, Rose in her individual interview talks about children who are in nursery care for long hours:

Rose: But these children are gonna be in nursery care for thirty hours a week. [...] How much of their parents are they going to see... If they're going to be in nursery and the parents are going to have long days? [...] but I just feel that family life [...] – it's not a priority. It just seems to be let's get everybody back into work [...] I just think ... that a parent at home has just got such an important job [...] and not a lot of emphasis is put on to that.

Rose criticises the government's 30 hours free childcare policy (DfE, 2015), suggesting that work is prioritised over family life and the importance of being a parent is not recognised. Her comments are reminiscent of Vincent et al.'s (2010) point that judgements of being a 'bad' mother are levelled at middle-class parents as well as working-class parents, particularly in the case of those mothers who appear to put their career before their children. The points raised in the small story are reminiscent of Levitas (1998), critique that government policies about work fail to address parents' caring responsibilities, particularly for mothers.

Osgood (2009) suggests there is a particular tension between the role of mother and Early Years Practitioner, for example, government policy does not address how an Early Years Practitioner who is also a mother, achieves a work-life balance. In relation to this issue, Rose tells a small story about her colleague who felt an obligation to go back to work after having a baby:

Rose: I've got a colleague at work at the moment... [...] who's just come back after maternity leave [...] financially she doesn't have to go back [...] but she said the pressure she's had from her friends... [...] as to 'When are you going back to work?' [...] She felt that she's had to go back to work and do some part-time work [...] because everyone's saying 'Well you don't want to just stay at home.' And I thought that was really interesting... [...] as to [...] why don't you want to stay at home?

S: And would she have preferred to stay...?

Rose: I think she would. [...] definitely. [...] 'Cause even at work she feels very torn [...] between her baby being in a nursery [...] and her being at home with her baby and seeing all of those fantastic milestones [...]

Rose emphasises the pressure felt by the mother by giving voice to the mother's friend, 'When are you going back to work?'. The mother's situation is presented as a moral

dilemma – to succumb to the pressure of her friends and return to work or stay at home and look after her baby. Her situation is reminiscent of the discourse of the ‘substitute mother’ (Osgood, 2005), returning to work to look after someone else’s children whilst someone else looks after her child. Overall the small story reflects a moral discourse of work, even for those mothers who may not need to work financially, the alternative of staying at home is no longer the accepted norm.

Millar and Ridge (2013) highlight how lone working mothers on low incomes are disadvantaged by childcare policy and employment opportunities. In addition, for those living in private rentals the risk of poverty is significantly increased (Marsh et al., 2017). Some of these issues were reflected in Christina’s small story about a lone parent who works long hours:

Christina: We’ve got a little boy in nursery school [...] and he attends eight to six and mum’s a lone parent and has been since she was young and she [...] also works a Saturday and takes him with her [...] and she was able to rent a place on her own for a while and just the cost got too much and she ended up getting in debt and so she’s ended having to move in with her parents who are quite begrudging about it [...] cos they’re living in a [...] tiny house [...] I mean this is a women who obviously works so much and she [...] just can’t do it .. I mean the fees of nursery are .. ridiculous but then you know they need to be for the expenses of it you know .. I know we get a bit for the two year funding<sup>17</sup> but a child like that isn’t actually entitled to two year funding [...] so [...] you do have just low income families and the majority do tend to be single mums really that [...] try and continue to work.

Christina’s small story serves to challenge the discourse of ‘work pays’, for example, although the mother works six days a week she still ends up in debt. Christina highlights how issues of high childcare costs, lack of entitlement to free childcare and high housing costs can result in homelessness. Overall the story supports the findings of Millar and Ridge (2013) and the difficulties for working lone parents on low incomes. However, in contrast to stigmatising discourses of the lone mother, such as the ‘chav mum’ (as discussed by Tyler, 2008), the mother is constructed as hard working yet disadvantaged by structural inequalities.

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<sup>17</sup> The ‘two year funding’ refers to free childcare funding for two-year-olds (Gov.UK, 2018b).

#### 4.2.5 The working father from Eastern Europe

Although most of the narratives were about mothers there were a small number about fathers and work. For example, Rose had worked with refugees and asylum seekers talked in detail about her experience of supporting a father, who had recently come to the UK from Eastern Europe in her individual interview:

Rose: It was one family in particular. [...] it was a man and as I say, he had an eleven-year-old daughter. [...] He literally had nothing [...] he came from Hungary. [...] It was just him and his daughter. [...] they didn't even have money for food' [...] we managed to get him bedding 'cause he had no bedding [...] knives and forks, clothes for the- for the eleven-year-old. [...] We brought her in, we managed to get, er, the funding because she couldn't go to school until September. [...] So for the rest of that term, she came into the nursery and we gave her a hot meal [...] while dad went off and managed to have interviews. [...] You look there and you think well actually they've got nothing. [...] And his priority was his daughter... because he was taking her out to job interviews.

In this story, Rose highlights the issues for a family coming to the UK with 'nothing'. The lack of basic commodities essential to living, such as food, bedding and clothes, reflect absolute poverty as described by Oppenheim (1993). The father is constructed as having a strong work ethic and being a good parent reminiscent of Miller's (2010) discourse of the 'good father', one that is involved with the care of the children as well as trying hard to provide financially for the family. The story reflects a moral discourse of the deserving parent, the father who is both taking care of his child as well as wanting to work. The intersection with migration makes his situation particularly precarious because of his lack of access to social support and basic commodities.

The UK has been constructed in media and political representations as a 'soft touch', in regard to immigration and asylum seekers (Tyler, 2013), however, many migrants experience disadvantage in the labour market in terms of low-paid jobs, poor working conditions, long hours and low status jobs (Mooney et al., 2013; ONS, 2016). Several participants told small stories about families from Eastern Europe, for example, Abi, in her individual interview tells a small story about families from Eastern Europe:

Abi: A lot of our two-year-old funded parents<sup>18</sup> are, erm, sort of, erm, Eastern European. [...] And, you know, you might get a few comments from the parents saying, 'Well these children, you know, aren't even from here and [...] they receive all this funding and they don't even work.' [...]

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<sup>18</sup> 'Two-year-old funded parents' refers to free childcare funding for two-year-olds (Gov.UK, 2018c).

but then you'll have the ones, that say have come over from Poland for example ... and they're working full-time in KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken] to make ends meet. [...] and actually, this funding is just there to support them while they need it. [...] So some of our parents really do need it and benefit from [it].

Abi gives voice to the parents in the setting who shame and distance the parent from Eastern Europe, for example, '[they] aren't even from here' and 'don't even work'. The parents' comments reflect the media discourses of a 'soft touch' UK, as described by Tyler (2013), suggesting that the system is too lenient towards migrants. Whilst the parents in the setting construct the parents from Eastern Europe as 'undeserving', Abi constructs them as 'deserving', challenging the abjection of migrants. She points out that the working parent has the free childcare ('two-year-old fund[ing]') 'while they need it'. Here, her words are reminiscent of New Labour's discourse of a 'hand up not a hand out' and how the benefits support parents who are working.

#### **4.2.6 Reflections**

Small stories about work and welfare illuminated the complex intersections between work, welfare, parenting, childcare, gender and migration. To a large extent Early Years Practitioners challenged a discourse of 'work always pays' with many small stories illustrating issues related to 'in-work poverty', such as limited job opportunities, low wages, precarious work, high childcare and housing costs. Understandings around work and welfare were complex, intersecting with gender and migration. Some Early Years Practitioners were less sympathetic to parents on benefits drawing on stigmatised discourses of welfare dependency. However, others were more sympathetic highlighting injustices of the welfare system, revealing how some parents, especially lone mothers, are particularly disadvantaged and stigmatised unfairly for not working ('damned if they do and damned if they don't'). Paradoxically, mothers were also stigmatised for working too much. In addition to stories about mothers, there were a smaller number of stories about fathers, one of which revealed complex intersections with migration.

#### **4.3 Narratives of the 'curve ball'**

Levitas (2012, p. 5) highlights the shift in political discourse 'from families that have troubles, through families that are 'troubled', to families that are or cause trouble', which has ignored structural factors, such as ill health, poor housing and low income. In contrast to the political discourse of 'troubled families', Early Years Practitioners

told numerous small stories about how unexpected disruptive events cause families ‘trouble’, through no fault of their own. The term ‘curve ball’ has been used in this section to refer to an unexpected disruptive event, a phrase used by Betty, in her narrative. In this next section, a series of small stories are discussed in relation to ‘curve balls’, relating to illness, death, separation and domestic violence.

#### **4.3.1 The ‘poorly new baby’**

Children living in areas of deprivation or with parents on lower incomes are likely to have an increased risk of health issues and a shorter life expectancy (ONS, 2014). In addition, families with a child with a disability are more likely to live in poverty, for example, making it more difficult for parent(s) to work because of caring responsibilities (Marsh et al., 2017). Betty, in her individual interview, tells a small story about a family who had a child with a serious medical condition reflecting how ‘curve balls’ can intersect, causing families to be particularly vulnerable to poverty:

Betty: Recently the family have been thrown another serious curveball [...] and their second child was born with a serious medical condition. [...] [Dad] had to leave from his job. Didn’t go to Citizen’s Advice which he perhaps should’ve done as to the fact that they weren’t prepared to keep him on [...] and take [the] family’s circumstances into consideration... includ[ing] an enormous amount of debt [...] and they were trying to manage the care of the older child here and at the same time try and see their very poorly new born baby [who was in hospital many miles away] [...] Transportation, things like that, costs were huge. [...] This family have had to come in for local area network loans [...] support for gas and electricity [...] getting foodbank vouchers [...] But my gosh they did their best [...] They’re a young family [...] but when they heard that they would have to have the house completely spruced up before their second child would be discharged, they went absolutely hell for leather to try and make this house look absolutely perfect. [...] Only be told by the hospital recently that actually can’t have the little one discharged to their home because the mum won’t be able to manage the three-year old and the baby with [taking medical equipment] [...] up and down the stairs. [...] And your heart goes out to them because [...] this family is doing the absolute utmost that they can.

In Betty’s small story the ‘curve ball’ of having a baby with a serious illness compound together with other ‘curve balls’, resulting in the family struggling to meet their basic needs. The father is reminiscent of Miller’s (2010) discourse of the ‘good father’, trying to care for his ill child as well as providing financially for the family. Betty empathises with the family, recounting how they ‘went absolute hell for leather’ to make the house ‘perfect’ and doing the ‘absolute utmost they can’. Overall the small story serves to challenge the discourse of ‘troubled families’, this family are not judged, shamed or



held responsible for their poverty instead they are constructed as ‘deserving’ despite their ‘troubles’.

#### **4.3.2 The bereaved father**

Lone parents are particularly vulnerable to poverty, with 47% of people in lone-parent families living in poverty (Marsh et al., 2017). One of the major factors effecting the vulnerability of lone parents is that, compared to a two-adult family, there is only one adult able to provide an income. Chloe, in her individual interview, tells a small story about a father who becomes a lone parent with young children after his partner dies:

Chloe: Well unfortunately his wife [partner] passed away 3 years ago he’s got two children [...] they didn’t have any life insurance or anything so the house isn’t paid for .. [...] and he now can’t afford the mortgage by himself [...] there was no sign that children lived there ... there was just his bed and it was a mattress on the floor [...] he’s now got himself in so much debt [...] he’s moving into a static caravan [...] three years ago you could have asked him this question and he’d gone ‘Oh yer, it’s definitely life style choices you know we would never be in poverty we’ve got two well paid jobs,’ and then all of a sudden that’s him [...] and that’s through no fault of anybody’s [...] so nobody knows what’s round the corner.

In Chloe’s story the father is subject to a series of ‘curve balls’, starting with the death of his wife and culminating in losing his home and children. The DWP (2017a) reports that families where two adults are working are the least vulnerable to poverty (7%). However, Chloe highlights the precarity of life even for families where both adults are working by giving voice to the father, ‘We would never be in poverty we’ve got two well paid jobs’. Her small story serves to challenge simplistic discourses, such as ‘work always pays’ and illustrates the complexity of life and how quickly circumstances can change even for families who appear at first financially secure.

#### **4.3.3 The ‘good’ father and the ‘bad’ mother**

Other small stories demonstrate the complexity of Early Years Practitioners’ narratives and how discourses of ‘curve balls’ co-exist with other discourses. For example, Chloe tells a small story about a father who had to give up studying medicine when his partner left:

Chloe: He was a single dad, it just suddenly happened, he dropped out of uni [...] he was suddenly just a full-time dad and that was what he had to do [...] so he used the funding [...] he deserved it .. he needed it .. and he was looking for work whilst they were here so that he then had money to get them a better place which was when he got this flat [...]

In a similar way to Betty's story, the father is reminiscent of Miller's (2010) discourse of the 'good father', someone who has given up studying so he can find work and provide for his children. Chloe constructs the father as 'deserving' of the funding<sup>19</sup> because he was 'looking for work', illustrating New Labour's discourse of benefits being a 'hand up, not a hand out'. Later in the story Chloe introduces the father's new partner:

Chloe: And I said to her about working .. *[she said]* 'I don't need to work I'm getting six hundred pound to pay towards the flat' [...] she's so laid back about it she's not panicking about everything, the child's always in brand new Adidas clothes .. she's always in brand new clothes [...] they are they are not .. hard up in the slightest [...] he, bless him, he looks exactly the same, the same trainers that he was wearing four years ago when his first child came here [...] and he's going to work and [...] he can never pick them up because he's always at work.

In contrast to the father, the partner is shamed for preferring to live on benefits rather than get a job. Her behaviour (no intention of working), physical appearance (wearing 'brand new clothes') resembles Tyler's (2008) construct of the 'chav mum', perhaps suggesting that mothers who choose not to work are more likely to be stigmatised than fathers. Chloe ends the story by contrasting the father's physical appearance and behaviour with that of the mother, for example, wearing the same clothes and 'always at work'. Overall the story reveals how simple discourses of 'deserving' or 'underserving' are limited in helping to understand the complexity of 'in-family' life.

#### 4.3.4 Domestic violence

Other small stories demonstrate the complex intersections with 'curve balls' and structural inequalities which result in poverty. For example, Sally and Sarah, in their focus group, tell a small story about how poverty intersects with domestic violence, temporary accommodation and social class:

Sally: There's a lot about poverty and domestic violence [...] I used to work [...] in a women's refuge in London and the amount of police officers' wives who were in there [...] from domestic violence so it wasn't income-based [...] at all, but in a way even then if you think about people moving to a refuge because they're often .. quite run down as well actually it's temporary accommodation [...]

Sarah: And actually, that in itself, that's a whole change

Sally: Change of circumstances, absolutely, because you've got such a mix of

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<sup>19</sup> 'funding' refers to free childcare funding for two-year-olds (Gov.UK, 2018b).

different sort of background

Sarah: I suppose if you were middle-class say, as [a] police officer's partner or what have you [...] changes that quite quickly and especially those families [...] where the male has been the main bread winner [and] the wife's stayed at home is likely not to have any qualifications .. so if that kind of relationship breaks down that's really detrimental for the children who are staying with the mum.

In contrast to a discourse of an underclass, the mother in this story is constructed as middle-class and the partner of a police officer. Casting the perpetrator as a 'police officer', makes the point that even those who are responsible for maintaining law and order can be morally irresponsible. The story highlights intersections between temporary housing, poverty and domestic violence. As discussed in Chapter Two temporary housing is a particular issue for lone parents with many families living in temporary accommodation for prolonged periods of time (Gerada, 2018).

#### **4.3.5 Reflections**

Small stories about the 'curve ball' correspond with the Child Poverty Action Group's (2018a) declaration that poverty can happen to anyone, although some might be more vulnerable, such as lone mothers. The stories reveal how unexpected events, such as disability, separation, illness and job loss can happen to anyone. On one level these stories appear to contest dominant discourses, for example, a discourse of an underclass does not stand up to scrutiny if a family is suddenly made homeless through domestic violence or separation. However, a closer analysis of the stories, reveals how the 'deserving' characters are framed around middle-class values, such as the family where two parents work or the discourse of the 'good fathers' prioritising the care of their children, and 'underserving' characters round the 'underclass', dependent on benefits and not wanting to work. From this perspective it could be argued that the stories to some extent reproduce dominant discourses of deserving and undeserving poor.

#### **4.4 Summary**

Early Years Practitioners' narratives about poverty were complex and nuanced revealing a complexity of interconnections between morality, motherhood (and fatherhood), parenting, work, welfare and 'curve balls' (unexpected events). Moral comparisons were drawn between parents who did not work and lived on benefits and parents who were hard working and on low wages reflecting discourses of the undeserving and deserving poor. On the one hand parents were 'othered', especially

those who were welfare dependent, via a process of stigmatisation, for example, prioritising life style choices, inability to manage money, inadequate parenting and for having a sense of entitlement, feeding into a discourse of the underclass and abjectification of the young working-class white mother. Although some small stories challenged dominant discourses by revealing how parents try to avoid stigma and shame through practices, such as ‘fitting in’ or presenting as if they are coping, these were in the minority. In contrast, Early Years Practitioners challenged the discourse of work pays by demonstrating empathy with parents experiencing ‘in-work’ poverty, revealing how issues, such as high childcare costs, low wages and precarious work disadvantages families with young children, especially for lone mothers. At a deeper level, Early Years Practitioners narratives of poverty revealed paradoxes and contradictions, for example, the small story about the mother who ‘works too much’ neglecting her role as a carer highlights the complex intersections between work, gender and motherhood. Other small stories revealed paradoxes in terms of government policy and the interconnections with dominant discourses, for example, in small stories about ‘you’re damned if you do and you’re damned if you don’t’, particularly around policy issues for lone mothers moving into work. On the other hand, paradoxes were highlighted in terms of the Early Years Practitioners’ professional roles, how to create open and supportive relationships with parents in poverty when also undertaking a surveillance role. Small stories about the ‘curve ball’, (poverty can happen to anyone), appeared to challenge the discourses of ‘work pays’ and the ‘underclass’. However, a closer analysis revealed how these were ‘deserving cases’ which intersected in complex ways with class, gender and migration, for example, drawing on discourses of the ‘good father’ who is ‘hard working’ and cares for his children. In addition, those who demonstrated middle-class values, such as ‘good parenting’ appeared to be judged more favourably. Overall these revealed how poverty intersects in complex ways with caring responsibilities, not just for both mothers, but also for fathers. These stories challenged a moral discourse of the underclass by constructing families as ‘having troubles’ as opposed to families who ‘cause trouble’.

## Chapter Five

### Personal and professional narratives of poverty

#### Introduction

This chapter addresses the third research question, ‘How does the personal and the professional shape Early Years Practitioners’ narratives of poverty?’ bringing together the connections between Early Years Practitioners’ discourses of poverty and how these are shaped by their lived experiences. The use of I-positions and small stories are employed to explore how Early Years Practitioners’ personal experiences of poverty intersect with their professional experiences of poverty and the dominant discourses which have been identified. The chapter is organised into four sections: narratives of poverty in childhood; narratives of motherhood and work; narratives of other places; and narratives of personal poverty.

#### 5.1 Narratives of poverty in childhood

As discussed in Chapter Two childhood is a particularly vulnerable time in terms of poverty. According to Ridge (2011) poverty permeates every area of children’s lives including the economic, social and relational. As Lister (2004) points out children bring extra costs to families which are exacerbated by women’s reduced participation in the labour market due to caring responsibilities. In the following small stories, participants reflect on their childhood experiences with reference to the stigma and shame of housing, parental separation and school.

##### 5.1.1 Childhood poverty –‘they came from the council houses and we didn’t’

Several Early Years Practitioners referred to housing in their narratives about poverty in relation to their own families and childhood. As discussed in Chapter Two, those living in social housing have been increasingly constructed as a socially excluded underclass (Watts, 2008). In her individual interview, Jane, speaking from her I-position of a child growing up in the South of England, draws comparisons between her grandparents who lived in Scotland and the children she went to school with:

Jane: My Granny [...] lived in a tenement<sup>20</sup> not [...] a horrible tenement it wasn’t in the middle of Glasgow it was on the outskirts [...] but they would have grills on the shop fronts which we didn’t have down here [...] they never owned their own house they always had a council house and that was fine that was just the way it was [...] there were always .. a really odd dichotomy really because there were the people [...] I went

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<sup>20</sup>Section 26 of the Tenements (Scotland) Act 2004 defines ‘tenement’ as two or more related but separate flats divided from each other horizontally.

to school not far away .. who came from **the** council houses [...] but my grandparents lived in council houses all their lives but they were different .. and [...] I don't even know where that came from [...] and I went to school with them and I never knew them they were never friends

S: When you say they were different?

Jane: I think it was only the fact that they lived in a council house .. [...] there were six council houses up the road and they came from the council houses and we didn't and there were more of us than them probably .. [...] but we were just never friends [...] so it's not actual poverty [...] it was all .. was an attitude.

Jane's comments are reminiscent of Townsend's (1979, p.31) relative definition of poverty and the extent to which a family might 'belong' or are 'excluded' from society. For example, both Jane's grandmother and the children 'up the road' lived in council owned property. Jane suggests that living in a council home was 'fine' for her grandmother, despite the allusions to poverty in the area (for example, 'the grills on the shop fronts'), suggesting that her grandmother 'belonged'. However, the children 'up the road' living in council-owned houses, were 'different' and 'never friends', suggesting a sense of 'othering'. The grandmother may have been constructed as 'belonging' because she was 'family', whereas the children down the road were not. At the end of the story, Jane hints at the stigma of social housing, suggesting that the exclusion of the children 'down the road' was 'not actual poverty [...] it was all .. was an attitude'. Jane's story illustrates the complexity of what gets counted as poverty and how this dynamically intersects with place, family and school. The small story has some resonance with Christina and Chloe's small story about home visits which is discussed in Chapter Four. For example, both stories illustrate how homes can serve as a way of judging or stigmatising parents in poverty.

### 5.1.2 Separation

As discussed in Chapter Four, a life change (or 'curve ball'), such as separation can happen to anyone. Ridge's (2017) study about low-income children and their relationship with their separated parents shows that children are aware of the financial constraints and pressures on their parents and try actively to mediate these by having lower expectations or demands. A small number of participants, such as Chloe spoke of their childhood experiences about when their parents separated:

Chloe When my parents split up my mum was actually fine ..I think it was my Dad [...] he had to move back in with his mum and things like that and when he did get a flat [...] it wasn't like my mum's house who you know

[...] well kept and we had this that and the other .. We'd go round there (*to my Dad's*) [...] my brother who's a bit younger than me he'd say [...] I want to go to McDonald's or something and I could see that the look on my Dad's face at the thought of having to find [...] a fiver or something for two children [...] so I was the voice of reason you know, even at six years old, I was like, 'We don't need a burger' you know [...] I think I knew about it from then.

Talking from the I-position of a child, Chloe compares the circumstance of her father with that of her mother, (for example, he did not have 'this that and the other'). She demonstrates empathy for her father and tries to help conceal his poverty by pretending that she does not want to go to McDonald's. The way she actively tries to subvert the demands of her young brother is reminiscent of Ridge's (2017) study about low income children and their separated parents. Chloe's insight into her father's situation is reminiscent of the awareness other participants demonstrated in relation to issues of stigma and shame, as discussed in Chapter Four, for example, the small story told by Becky and Iris about why parents might try to hide their poverty through fear of being considered a 'bad parent'. At the end of the small story Chloe talks about how her professional experience of working with families has added to her understanding of poverty:

Chloe: Naturally in your mind you think it's somebody that's got nothing .. you walk into a cold .. flat and there's it's dark and they can't afford to eat properly and they're all skinny [...] but that's .. I don't think necessarily it [...] I don't think that it's easy to categorise it [...] so even just from working here and coming across families that are you know .. using the funding to its absolute maximum because they wouldn't be able to afford to otherwise and other parents using the funding because they can and they qualify for it but they can't be bothered to work so [...] yer my knowledge is definitely greater now.

Chloe highlights the complexity of poverty, suggesting that poverty is more than physical or material affordance. To illustrate her point, she talks about families on benefits, suggesting that some are more deserving than others, for example, 'using the funding to the absolute maximum' compared to others who 'qualify for it but they can't be bothered to work'. Her story serves as a prelude to another small story which is discussed in Chapter Four, the story about the father who gave up studying medicine to care for his children after he separated with his partner. Although Chloe does not draw any comparisons between the two, there are similarities between her stories of her own father and the father who studied medicine, for example, both are constructed as 'deserving' and victims of 'curve balls' (separation from their partners).

### 5.1.3 Stigma and shame at school

Ridge's (2003) study about children on low incomes in England and Wales highlighted stigmatising practices around school, such as children lining up separately to receive free school meals<sup>21</sup>. One participant, Nicole, in her individual interview, tells a small story from her childhood about free school meals:

Nicole: We'd [...] line up [...] sort of sounds bad really, but [...] you were literally separated [...] people would go to the back of the kitchens get their free lunch and then sit down with this paper bag so you always know who's who [...] It was terrible even as a child I didn't like the way they would treat them [...] some would get bullied, some [...] ended (*up*) bullying to get the money off other children so they could get food [...] and some of them didn't want to get the free school meals so they didn't carry round [...] the paper bag [...] I hated it .. it really annoyed me I tried [...] to ignore it in the end because I was very shy and I think if I saw it now I'd say something [...] but [...] if I had something spare .. somebody else was hungry I'd give it to them.

Nicole highlights the stigmatising practice around the delivery of free school meals and how this serves to identify and shame the children (for example, 'you were literally separated' and 'know who's who'). Her use of emotional language, such as 'terrible' and 'I hated it' conveys her strength of feeling in relation to the issue. She empathises with the children who have free school meals stating that if she saw this happening how she would 'say something', perhaps suggesting that this early experience has informed her sense of justice and professional practice. Her experience echoes the findings of Ridge's (2003) study, for example, the stigmatising practice of the 'paper bag' for children who have free school meals. Her story serves to challenge the stigma associated with poverty and the insensitivity of practices to ameliorate poverty. Although Nicole is reflecting back on her childhood, her story resonates with stigmatising practices highlighted by others which are discussed in Chapter Four, for example, Diana's small story about how parents feel too embarrassed and ashamed to respond to letters from school offering financial support.

### 5.1.4 Reflections

The small stories about Early Years Practitioners' experiences of poverty in childhood draw attention to stigmatising practices around social housing and free school meals,

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<sup>21</sup> Free school meals are available to every child in their first three years at school (reception, year one and year two). After that age children are only eligible for free school meals if they are in receipt of certain benefits (Gov.UK, 2018c).



showing how particular children and families in poverty are identified and ‘othered’. There is a complexity around who gets judged and who does not. The small stories suggest that, for these Early Years Practitioners, their own family is likely to be less stigmatised than others.

## 5.2 Narratives of motherhood and work

As discussed in Chapter One, government policy does not address how an Early Years Practitioner, who is also a mother, achieves a work-life balance and accesses affordable childcare for her own children. Osgood (2005, p. 295) describes this as the ‘gender loop’, whereby, mothers were encouraged to ‘exchange unpaid childcare work for low-paid work in order to employ another woman, on low wages, to provide childcare’. Over half of the participants who were interviewed were mothers (nine out of 16). Their narratives revealed tensions between motherhood and work and how these connected with discourses of the ‘good mother’, ‘substitute mother’ and ‘professionalisation’, whilst at the same time intersecting with issues of social class, gender, high childcare costs, low pay and precarious work.

### 5.2.1 Professionalisation

Osgood (2005, p. 300) discusses how many Early Years Practitioners have engaged with a discourse of professionalism – for example, ‘extensive study and an avid commitment to career success’ – as a way of addressing issues of low pay and low status. As a consequence, professionalisation of the sector has resulted in some Early Years Practitioners moving from lower paid provision within the sector to higher paid provision. Several Early Years Practitioners, such as Lesley told small stories about professionalisation:

Lesley: I was .. a manager for *[name of a large retail store]* until I fell pregnant and then [...] I transferred to *[name of another retail company]* [...] because it was closer because I had my own children [...] once the children had all started going to school .. that’s when [...] my friend just said to me ‘Are you [...] interested .. in .. working at the nursery?’ and I [...] wasn’t really a nursery fan because I was a mum you know [...] years ago [...] the nurseries were there but ..I didn’t want to consider that for my children I wanted to .. look after them myself so .. it was a bit like ‘I’m not sure but [...] I’ll come along and have a little look and I’m certainly not qualified I’m only a mummy so .. but [...] I enjoyed it so that’s how I started as just a bank staff ... mum helping and ..I was very fortunate really because that was the time the government was throwing money at early years for people to be qualified and [...] I said ‘Oh yer I’d rather be

qualified, I'm just the sort of person, I'd like to be knowledgeable in what we're doing' [...] and that was my journey of my eight years of studying [...] but I loved it.

Talking from both her professional and personal I-positions, Lesley's small story about becoming an Early Years Practitioner draws on the discourses of the 'substitute mother' and professionalisation. When Lesley first starts working at the nursery she constructs herself as 'not qualified, I'm only a mummy' – here her comments are reminiscent of Osgood's (2005) discourse of the Early Years Practitioner as a 'substitute mother', an unskilled job performed by women. She moves on to engage with the discourse of the professionalisation by emphasising her love of studying and how she wanted to be 'qualified' and 'knowledgeable'. Lesley's engagement with higher education reflects the trend of early years graduates moving away from directly working with young children into better paid jobs (as discussed by Tickell, 2011). At the same time her comment, 'I'd rather be qualified, I'm just that sort of person' is reminiscent of Gillies' (2005, p. 837) critique of New Labour's policy on tackling child poverty, for example, how prosperity is derived 'from being the right kind of (middle-class) self'. Here Lesley appears to draw on a meritocratic discourse, where achievement is 'effectively explained at the level of the individual rather than in terms of a particular group or class' (Gillies, 2005, p. 836), for example, Lesley suggests it is being the 'right kind of person' that has afforded her success. Lesley discusses the tension between her role as a mother and working at the nursery, speaking from her I-position as a mother, she constructs herself as someone who wanted to stay at home and look after her children. She draws on a discourse of the 'good' middle-class mother, as analysed by Miller (2012), one who recognises the importance of time spent at home with their child. Her comments are also reminiscent of the small story told by Rose (discussed in Chapter Four) about the mother who would rather be at home with her children but feels under pressure to return to work.

### **5.2.2 Classed discourses of parenting**

In similar ways to Lesley, many participants, although not mentioning class specifically, drew on classed discourses of parenting. For example, Jackie in her small story from her individual interview compares her own mothering with that of other parents in relation to consumerism:

Jackie: I think you know the media and magazines do put pressure on people to buy buy buy and be a consumer of stuff they don't really need ...and it takes quite a lot of strength to resist that doesn't it? So people get

themselves into debt a lot, and probably a lot more than they used to [...]  
**I grew up** being taught a very strong sort of moral way, you don't borrow money [...] and kind of stuck to it actually ...and I think a lot of people haven't had that. [...]

Jackie talks about the pressure people are under from the media to buy certain things which gets them into debt. On the one hand, she sympathises with parents suggesting it 'takes quite a lot of strength to resist'. On the other hand, she suggests a lack of moral restraint and degeneracy, for example, suggesting that people are no longer brought up not to 'borrow money'. Here Jackie draws on a moral discourse, positioning herself as a 'good mother' who demonstrates financial restraint compared to parents who succumb to the pressures of consumerism resulting in debt. Drawing on Gewirtz's (2001) understanding of social class, Jackie positions herself within a normative middle-class discourse, managing her money appropriately, compared to the 'young mothers' who are positioned within an 'underclass' discourse (for example, getting themselves into debt). Jackie's small story is reminiscent of others discussed in Chapter Four, such as Heather's small story about parents in poverty as excessive consumer of goods and services (such as a 'plasma TV') which is reminiscent of Tyler's (2008) construct of the 'chav mum'.

### 5.2.3 Childcare costs

As discussed in Chapter Two, some parents do not gain financially from moving into work, particularly if they have high childcare costs (Harding et al., 2017). Several participants, such as Jackie, highlighted the issues of low paid work and childcare costs in a small story from her interview:

Jackie: When I had my own children, we weren't very well off at all [...] we did decide that I'd stay at home and survive on one wage and that wasn't easy but [...] as long as we could feed and house the children [...] then we were prepared not have other things, like we didn't have a car and a telly [...] which in the 80s this was quite unusual but it was the choice we made up to a point [...] but I still didn't think we were poor then [...] If I'd gone to work I couldn't of earnt very much, I couldn't have afforded the childcare anyway.

Talking from her I-position as a mother, Jackie distances herself from those in poverty by explaining that although they 'weren't very well off' they were not 'poor'. Her reluctance to use the term 'poor' is reminiscent of the findings of Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) who found that those in poverty avoid shame and stigma by avoiding the language of poverty. Her comments on being 'prepared' to do without

things contrasts with small stories discussed in Chapter Four, such as Heather, who constructed some parents in poverty as excessive consumers of goods cognisant with Tyler's (2008) analysis of the 'chav mum'. In contrast to the construct of the 'chav mum', Jackie draws on the discourse of the 'good mother' (Vincent et al., 2010), for example, caring for her children at home and making material sacrifices. However, she points out that the decision to stay at home was only a choice 'up to a point' because high childcare costs would have made it difficult to earn 'very much'. Her small story reflects similar issues discussed in Chapter Four about work and childcare, for example, Christina's small story about the lone parent who despite working full-time is unable to afford her own home and ends up living with her parents.

#### 5.2.4 Moral restraint – 'I only have one child'

As a result of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 a two-child benefit limit was introduced in April 2017 resulting in some benefits being limited to the first two children in a family (Gov.UK, 2017b). The objective of the policy was to ensure that 'those on benefits face the same financial choices around the number of children they can afford as those supporting themselves through work' (DWP, 2015, p. 1). CPAG (2018b) challenged the two-child limit on the grounds that it 'unlawfully discriminates against a number of different groups and, although it was aimed at those on benefits, 70% of those who were likely to be affected were in work'<sup>22</sup>. CPAG, (2018b) predicted that as a result of the policy, child poverty was likely to increase by 10%. Although participants did not refer directly to the two-child policy<sup>23</sup>, a small story by Diana, reflects some of the issues:

Diana: I'm a parent [...] and I only have one child [...] because we made the decision that I needed to go back to work and actually child care and also our housing meant that we weren't in a position to have any more and we made that decision ourselves to keep ourselves stable [...] I then see families with lots and lots of children and really struggling and I [...] can understand why they would want these children because [...] I work with children .. the joy that they bring you is incredible [...] I suppose there is part of me that just thinks **maybe** you could have made slightly different choices but they've made their own choices that's down to them they [...] live with that day in day out and *(it's)* not my job to ever tell anybody that .. it's my job to [...]

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<sup>22</sup> At the time of writing CPAG's challenge of the two-child limit was currently with the Court of Appeal with a request to heard by the end of 2018.

<sup>23</sup> The two-child policy was implemented after the data was collected.

help them the best they can .. and those children have masses of advantages to my one single child at home .. growing up with loads of other children around them will always be a fabulous experience and there's probably so much love in those families that keep them going.

Diana compares her personal decision to have only one child with some of the families she works with. On the one hand, she makes a moral judgement about families with 'lots of children', commenting that 'maybe you could have made slightly different choices', perhaps suggesting that having a large number of children is financially irresponsible. However, on the other hand, she imagines the social and emotional advantages a larger family may have over her 'one single child', such as the 'love and joy' afforded by a large family. Diana's small story reflects a morality of restraint, for example, making a decision to have only one child to avoid financial risk. Here she positions herself as a 'good mother', providing for her child as well as working and contributing financially. However, at the same time, her story suggests a personal sadness and regret arising from the decision to have only one child. The irony of her story is perhaps how it links to Osgood's (2005) analysis of the 'substitute mother' and the intersection between the professional and the personal. Professionally, Diana positions herself as serving the needs of the mother in poverty (who might have demonstrated moral restraint by having less children), whilst at the same time, Diana has made a personal sacrifice in only having one child.

### 5.2.5 Precarious work

Since 2009 the number of children's centres have declined significantly and many have experienced restructures and reductions in services and staffing (Sammons et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018). Heather, in her individual interview, talks about how she was affected by a restructure in the children's centre:

Heather [I] wasn't very happy to begin with because [...] it was a demotion down a level [...] I had a pay cut .. but it was gradual [...] they staggered it [...] and then they did another restructure three years later [...] I went for my job because [...] actually I'm quite happy where I am [...] so some of it I chose to do, some of it somebody else got me in to do [...] but actually it's worked out for the better [...] So .. yeah. I've done lots *[laughs]* [...] for about five years I did two jobs. I worked in a nightclub, some pubs as well as working full-time [...] as a nursery nurse. [...] just so that I could get extra cash and that's how I bought my property. I worked seven days a week. [...] I'm a hard grafter *[chuckles]*.

Despite experiencing less pay and a different job as a result of a restructure in the children's centre, Heather describes herself as 'quite happy where I am'. The challenges for Heather to afford her own house resonate with the low pay of women working in childcare (LPC, 2016). Her comments about being a 'hard grafter' (hard worker) and working 'two jobs' to buy her own home further reflects the challenges for an Early Years Practitioner buying a house in the south-east of England where prices are high. Reminiscent of a meritocratic discourse, Heather suggests that hard work is rewarded, however, structural inequalities, such as low pay and gender inequality go uncontested. Overall Heather positions herself within a discourse of the 'deserving poor' (for example, working hard to buy her home). Her small story resonates with other stories discussed in Chapter Four, such as Christina's story of the lone mother who despite working long hours struggles to afford her own home.

#### **5.2.6 Reflections**

Narratives of motherhood and poverty highlighted the tensions experienced by many of the Early Years Practitioners between their parenting responsibilities and their professional responsibilities. All of the Early Years Practitioners who told stories about being mothers drew on discourses of the 'good mother' in relation to their personal lives, which to a large extent drew on normative middle-class attributes, such as being 'good' with money and demonstrating 'moral restraint'. To some extent narratives reflected how some Early Years Practitioners distanced themselves from those in poverty, for example, avoiding using the language of poverty in relation to themselves and by judging others for having too many children. To some extent narratives relating to discourses of 'work always pays' were contested by highlighting examples of low pay and the precarity of early years work. However, rather than blaming government policy or structural inequalities, Early Years Practitioners drew on a neoliberal discourse of personal resourcefulness, for example, engaging with a discourse of professionalisation and becoming more qualified or working long hours. These practices are reminiscent of Gewirtz (2001) and Gillies (2005, p. 837) and their analysis of New Labour's approach to child poverty, for example, how 'prosperity derives from being the right kind of (middle-class) self, while poverty and disadvantage is associated with poor self-management'. Overall, their narratives perhaps explain why in Chapter Four they are more sympathetic to those who engage with 'work' and make similar sacrifices to themselves.

### 5.3 Narratives of poverty in other places

#### 5.3.1 ‘Leafy suburbs’ and ‘boarded up windows’

Tomlinson (2018) states that the UK has some of the worst regional inequalities, for example, poverty rates in the north-east of England are much higher than in the south-east. Several Early Years Practitioners’ narratives drew on experiences of living and working in different parts of the UK. These narratives had implications for how poverty was understood and what was recognised as poverty. For example, Yvonne, talks about when she was a young mother living in a large city in the north-east of England:

- Yvonne: On one hand .. very affluent city but on .. the other hand you know pockets of deprivation and [...] you know you drive from the sort of the leafy suburbs and then quite quickly you’re in to areas where [...] windows boarded up and things like that [...] its sort of quite obvious that [...] some people live in a completely different way to the way that you have the privilege of living.
- S: And what sort of things did you notice?
- Yvonne: [...] I don’t know a very depressing environment really for people .. I mean I knew nothing about the people who lived there it was just I thought if I had to live in this environment I would feel that .. probably there was an inequality in life really [...]
- S: So an inequality .. in terms of? ...
- Yvonne: What life is like for them [...] what life is like [...] for me really [...] when we do home visits [...] the reality of how people live is really quite stark [...] although I do have to say that you [...] can go to some homes where there obviously is [...] very little and yet they are maintained to a better standard and you can go to homes where there is obviously quite a lot of money and [...] there you think, ‘Oh you know’ so it’s [...] not as clear cut as that.

Yvonne’s use of language highlights the stark difference between the affluent areas of the city (the ‘leafy suburbs’) compared to the poorer areas (‘the boarded-up windows’). She sympathises with those in poverty, recognising the inequality between the ‘privilege’ of her own life compared to those living in a ‘depressing environment’. At the end of the story she shifts I-position and talks from her professional role about home visits. She demonstrates empathy for those with less financial income, suggesting that their homes are ‘maintained to a better standard’ than some of the families with more money. Her story connects to an earlier story about home visits told by Christina, Chloe and Abi discussed in Chapter Four. In both stories the home visits serve as a means of surveillance and a way of making a judgement about parents, however, in contrast to

other stories, Yvonne, rather than making a negative judgement on the families in poverty, challenges a discourse of an underclass, by suggesting that despite limited incomes some parents in poverty maintain their homes to a higher standard than more affluent parents.

### 5.3.2 ‘Genuine poverty’ in Australia

As discussed in Chapter Two, comparisons of poverty in different parts of the world can be unhelpful, particularly if the societies are very different (Lister, 2004). A small number of Early Years Practitioners told stories about poverty in other countries, for example, Florence, talked about her experiences of living in Australia and working in a women’s refuge:

Florence: But they would, some of them would end up with absolutely nothing. And sometimes the aboriginal children didn’t even have shoes on their feet or any- you know? They just [...] have to get away [...] and run away [...] and wouldn’t have anything [...] So that- I mean, that was one thing with poverty.

Florence’s description of poverty in the women’s refuge is extreme and is reminiscent of an absolute definition of poverty (as discussed by Oppenheim, 1993 in Chapter Two). Florence’s reference to the children being Aboriginal highlights a further intersection between race and poverty. As the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2016) point out, the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal peoples is well-documented. Florence presents herself as different and shaped by her experience in Australia. Later in the interview she tells another small story about an encounter with some young Aboriginal people.

Florence: Because of working at the refuge, I saw a totally different side of *[name of city]* to a lot of people [...] We went out one night [...] into *[name of city]* and [...] there were a whole lot of Aboriginal young people walking past. [...] The others didn’t really pay much attention to them largely because they didn’t want to pay too much attention [...] but I noticed them [...] I said, ‘Did you see them?’ [...] And they said ‘Well yeah, we did but we weren’t looking at them. You know, it’s better not to.’ And I said, ‘Well it’s so sad [...] they’re glue sniffing’ [...] We’d had a case of glue sniffing at the refuge [...] Again, they didn’t notice. They didn’t notice things like that. [...] there was somewhere else we went and somebody said about drugs and violence. And again, they said ‘Oh, yeah but, you know, people talk about these things...and [...] we don’t see it happen [...] so I don’t think it’s [...] happening that much.’ And I said, ‘Well you’d be surprised ... because [...] that’s how quite a lot of these women ended up in there... because [...] their husband .. partner might have a gun at home .. or were [...] spending the money on drugs.



Florence draws attention to how the young Aboriginal people were intentionally ignored and ‘othered’, by her companions. In contrast she constructs herself as someone who actively ‘notices’ the Aboriginal people and challenges the behaviour of the others, for example, asking, ‘Did you see them?’ However, rather than focusing on the poverty of the young Aboriginal people, she focuses on their behaviour, the drugs and violence. On the one hand, this focus on behaviour, might suggest a discourse of an ‘underclass’, however, rather than judging their behaviour, Florence sympathises with their situation, for example, commenting to her companions that, ‘it’s so sad [...] they’re glue sniffing’. Although Florence is able to ‘notice’ poverty in the context of Australia, she finds it difficult to ‘notice’ poverty within her setting in England, for example:

Florence: In my group, I don’t see it so much [...] I think it’s hidden away still [...] It depends what you define as- as poverty really in a way, doesn’t it? [*chuckles*] It goes right down to that. [...] I mean [...] there is, like I said, genuine poverty of [...] only having what you’re standing up in. But you don’t see that on a day-to-day basis [...] and you don’t really see [...] children [...] coming in [...] the same clothes...or anything quite like that.

Florence’s reference to ‘genuine poverty’ and ‘only having what you’re standing up in’ echoes her earlier story of the families in the women’s refuge, and her understanding of poverty as absolute. Her experience is reminiscent of Shildrick and MacDonald’s (2013) study and how some people find it difficult to recognise poverty in the UK, instead only associating it with ‘elsewhere’. It is perhaps Florence’s experience of absolute poverty in a different context (Australia) which has made it difficult for her to ‘notice’ poverty within her setting in England. Her story contrasts with stories told by other participants, such as Diana who does notice signs of material poverty in her setting, for example, her story about the children who always wear the same clothes (as discussed in Chapter Four).

### 5.3.3 Reflections

Yvonne and Florence’s small stories illuminate the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and how it intersects with place. These experiences appeared to shape the extent to which they were able to ‘notice’ poverty within their professional roles and local context. Yvonne, compared to other practitioners, appeared to be more aware of the resourcefulness of parents in poverty and how they managed to maintain their homes despite being on limited incomes. On the other hand, for Florence, her experience of living in Australia appeared to make it more difficult for her to notice poverty in her local context.

## 5.4 Narratives of personal poverty

### 5.4.1 ‘At no point did I think my children were poverty stricken’

Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) found that those in poverty avoid using the language of poverty because of associations with shame and stigma. Many of the Early Years Practitioners talked about experiences of financial restraint at different points in their lives, however, only one, Audrey, talked about her experiences of poverty. Audrey’s narrative is particularly illuminating as she was able to reflect on experiences both as a mother who is homeless and living on benefits and as a mother who is working. For example, in her focus group she talks about her experience of living in a hostel:

Audrey: We’ve been homeless .. we’ve been on benefits you know [...] but at no point did I think my children are poverty stricken [...] because you know although it was a care hostel accommodation we provided a roof over our head, we provided three meals a day, the children had clothes .. so to me my children might have been disadvantaged but I wouldn’t say they were living in poverty I would have been really offended by that because you know as a person I didn’t really think that was what our lives were about whereas [...] a lot of [...] families probably do see themselves as living in poverty because there’s no end to that .. there’s no I’m going to get a job or when things get better [...]

On the one hand, Audrey distances herself from the shame and stigma of the language of poverty suggesting that her children were ‘disadvantaged’ rather than ‘poverty stricken’ and by constructing herself as a ‘good mother’ providing for her children. However, on the other hand, she also makes a distinction between what can and cannot be counted as poverty. For example, suggesting that poverty is ongoing (‘where’s there’s no end’) and a lack of hope (‘there’s no I’m going to get a job or when things get better’). The distinction Audrey makes between herself and others in poverty is consistent with Chase and Walker’s (2012, p. 752) findings that those who are vulnerable to poverty, distance themselves from the label by passing it to ‘others’. Her small story overlaps with Becky and Iris’s small story (as discussed in Chapter Four) about how parents try to hide their poverty and the fear of being ‘found out’. In both stories there is a sense that the parent wants to present as if they are ‘coping’ and to avoid the stigma of being ‘found out’ or being thought of as a ‘bad parent’.

### 5.4.2 Keeping up appearances

Ridge (2011, p. 76) highlights how poverty in childhood ‘extracts a high emotional toll on children trying to “fit in” and “join in” with their peers’, for example, children at school are particularly worried about being viewed as different and bullied. Later on in

her individual interview and drawing on her I-position as a mother, Audrey talks about her worries about non-uniform day:

Audrey: You know, when I was on benefits and my kids were at school, I used to feel like if they had a non-uniform day, I had to go out and buy my kids new clothes... and leave myself really short for the rest of the week .. 'cause I used to think, 'I don't want everyone looking at my kids thinking we're tramps. I don't want everyone judging me and thinking that I don't look after my kids 'cause I haven't got a job', and I don't feel the need to do that *[now]* because I don't feel that everyone's judging us. So, you know, if it's non-uniform day, my kids get whatever's clean *[chuckles]* really [...] Whereas when I was on benefits I felt really judged and I felt crap about myself. [...] So it's not the money, it's that self-esteem... and how they perceive themselves and how other people perceive themselves .. 'cause people don't look at me and think, 'Oh she's got no money' ...people look at me and think, 'Oh she's got a job, she's got a nice family.' People look at someone else who might not have a completely different budget to me and think 'Well look at them. They're on the dole. They don't work' or 'Look, they're not looking after the kids properly.'

In this small story, Audrey draws on a discourse of the 'good mother', one who is putting her children first and trying to protect both herself and her children from judgement and shaming. The language she uses to describe how she is feeling living on benefits (for example, 'judged' and 'crap') is almost identical to the language she uses in her small story about her professional experience of working with parents (discussed in Chapter Four), for example, 'people talk to them like they're crap and people look down on them'. Audrey's personal story about poverty is reminiscent of Chase and Walker's (2012) study and the importance those in poverty attach to 'keeping up appearances'. At the end of the small story Audrey comments on how, as a working parent, she 'no longer feels judged' and it no longer matters what her children wear as long as it is 'clean'. As she points out, poverty is not only about 'the money'—despite having a job Audrey suggests she is no better off than a family on benefits. Here her comments reflect Townsend's (1979) understanding of the subjective experience of poverty, that is, the extent to which an individual may feel they belong in a society. On the one hand her story serves to challenge an underclass discourse, by illuminating how families on benefits are shamed and constructed as inadequate parents. On the other hand, her story reveals how 'work' might not afford financial advantage but serves to provide moral acceptance, through the discourse of the deserving hardworking poor.

### 5.4.3 Avoiding shame

Chase and Walker's (2012) study of poverty in the UK suggests that parents feel judged by the benefit system in relation to their work history. In her focus group, Audrey talked further about her personal experiences of poverty and the shame of asking for help:

Audrey: I know when we were on benefits I paid for all my kids school trips and you know [they] all say, 'Well if you're struggling come and see the teacher' .. I'm not seeing the teacher, I don't want them thinking that I can't do things for my kids .. and again **it is** a pride thing as well but [...] you already feel segregated .. you already have to go to the job centre and beg for your money [...] sit on the phone all day repeat yourself again and again .. why you haven't got a job .. why your partner's off sick .. why you're a single parent and fill out form after form and that is so demoralising and demeaning and then to have to go [...] and explain to your school that you can't afford it and people will just find the money because [...] they already feel so kind of dehumanised and just it's emotionally .. it's exhausting.

The strength of Audrey's language vividly portrays the experience of living on benefits, for example, feeling 'segregated', 'demoralis[ed]' and 'demean[ed]'. She alludes to the shame and emotion of poverty, having to 'beg for your money' from the job centre and how she felt 'dehumanised' and emotionally exhausted. As Chase and Walker (2012, p. 743) point out, people in poverty rarely name 'shame', but instead use words which are synonymous. The underlying message of Audrey's story is that it is perhaps better to pay for the school trip rather than risk further shaming by asking for financial help from the school. Audrey's story is similar to a small story told by Diana (discussed in Chapter Four) about the shame of asking the school for financial assistance. In both cases these small stories illustrate Chase and Walker's (2012) finding that those in poverty, in response to feeling and being shamed, engage with notions of 'pride', for example, not asking for help. Overall both Audrey and Diana's small stories reflect an underclass discourse with those living on benefits experiencing shame and judgement.

### 5.4.4 Getting a job – 'it's not that easy'

As discussed in Chapter Two, the 'sheer grind of poverty' and resulting stress can undermine individual agency for those in poverty so that day to day survival is prioritised over long term aims (Lister, 2015, p. 153). At the end of her individual interview, Audrey provides a personal insight into the challenges of living in poverty and why even thinking about getting a job can be so difficult:

Audrey: It's not as easy as just going and getting a job [...] 'cause if someone had said to us when we were at our most, kind of,

vulnerable financially, 'Well you know what? Just go and get a job'... and someone had forced me into work... then I would've just been completely terrified [...] So it does give you that empathy [...] and you [...] do understand that the challenges every day for them aren't necessarily, 'Oh I'm gonna get up and look for a job', it's, 'I'm gonna get up and see if the Job Centre paid my money today', because sometimes [...] the money just isn't there [...] and you're sitting there with your kids with no food and it's difficult to find that motivation to aspire to more... when you're cold and you're hungry and [...] you can't give your kids what you want to.

Drawing on her own experience Audrey explains the emotional impact of feeling 'forced' into work by others. Her comments (for example, 'Just go and get a job') are reminiscent of Chase and Walker (2012) who suggest that those who are in more affluent situations often have little understanding of the experience of poverty. At the end of her small story, she speaks from the position of the mother in poverty, illuminating how difficult it is to feel motivated to find work when faced with the physical challenges of poverty, 'when you're cold and you're hungry'. Her comments are reminiscent of Lister (2015) and how the day to day survival (for example, feeding the children) is prioritised over long term aims (such as getting a job). Overall Audrey's small story serves to challenge the discourse of the underclass by illuminating how the physical hardships of living in poverty can be overlooked.

#### **5.4.5 Reflections**

Audrey's narrative challenges the discourse of the underclass by illuminating her personal experience of poverty. On the one hand, her small stories illustrate how a discourse of an underclass serves to stigmatise and shame those who are living on benefits, and how the emotional toll and day-to-day survival of absolute poverty can go unrecognised. At the same time, Audrey demonstrates how those in poverty avoid the stigma and shame through a range of practices, such as avoidance of the term 'poverty', keeping up appearances, drawing on positive discourses, such as that of the 'good mother', and not asking for help. Her narrative illuminates how poverty is not only to do with 'money' but is also 'relational', a co-construction of how you are perceived by others and how you perceive yourself. For example, this is evidenced by the comparisons between herself as a mother in paid employment, one who is and feels respected and accepted, and a mother living on benefits, one who is and feels judged and shamed. There are strong links between Audrey's small stories about her personal experiences and those that she and others tell in Chapter Four in relation to their

professional experiences. For example, Christina, Diana and Abi's small story about how families in poverty avoid the stigma and shame of poverty by keeping up appearances. Although both Audrey and other Early Years Practitioners demonstrated understanding and empathy towards those in poverty, arguably Audrey's experience of absolute poverty, gave her a more in-depth understanding of the experience of poverty in terms of shame and stigma.

### **5.5 Summary**

These narratives of Early Years Practitioners' personal experiences illuminate the complexities and challenges of conceptualising poverty. Their small stories suggest they understood poverty as more than financial and as intersecting with both structural inequalities, (such as race, place, housing) as well as a moral discourse of deserving and undeserving poor. Although stigmatising practices (for example, free school meals and the benefit system) were challenged, some appeared to be more favoured than others, for example, family members and those who had experienced 'curve balls' (unexpected events). Experiences of poverty in other places revealed how poverty intersected with other inequalities, such as race and place, but also served to render poverty 'invisible' in the local context. Overall participants positioned themselves within normative middle-class discourses, such as the good mother, moral restraint, hard work and resourcefulness. All Early Years Practitioners were careful to distance themselves socially from poverty, this was pervasive across a range of experiences and exercised in numerous ways (such as: judging others for a lack of moral restraint; rejecting the personal label of poverty; constructing themselves as good mothers; keeping up appearances; providing for their children; not seeking help; being a hard worker; and becoming a professional). As Lister (2015) points out, such practices serve to reinforce stigmatising and shaming discourses of poverty, such as that of the underclass and deserving poor. Personal experiences of absolute poverty were rare, however, where this was experienced they provided a greater insight into poverty and the accompanying shame and stigma, suggesting that personal experience may afford more understanding and empathy with those in poverty. Overall strong synergies were observed between how Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty intersected with their professional experiences.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

This final chapter addresses the overarching research question of the thesis, ‘How do Early Years Practitioners understand poverty in early childhood?’. The contribution the thesis makes to knowledge is addressed in terms of how poverty is conceptualised, discourses of poverty and the literature about Early Years Practitioners and poverty. The methodological contribution in terms of the value of attention to small stories, I-positions and use of multiple methods is discussed. I conclude with revisiting my researcher positionality and reflexivity and consider how the research has influenced my professional role as a senior lecturer together with recommendations for training and educational opportunities for Early Years Practitioners.

#### 6.1. Conceptualisation of poverty

Theoretically, the thesis has aimed to contribute to a body of literature on the conceptualisation of poverty, including public, policy and professional discourses of poverty, and the importance of paying attention to the intersection of the personal and professional. Poverty is conceptualised as a social construction shaped by political discourse, dynamic, multi-dimensional and intersectional. However, it was concurrently recognised that poverty needs to be understood at a societal level and that the experience of poverty is determined by ‘self’ and ‘other’ through discourse. Overall, Early Years Practitioners’ narratives presented complex intersections between morality and motherhood (and fatherhood), parenting, work, welfare, gender, social class and race, providing a richer understanding of poverty. Their understandings of poverty were multi-dimensional and dynamic incorporating both relative and absolute conceptualisations. Reminiscent of Townsend (1979), poverty was understood in both objective terms, recognising the material and financial; as well as the subjective, the experience of poverty, such as the emotion of shame, stigmatisation and judgement. These findings contrast with the way that successive governments have defined and measured poverty according to financial dimensions (and more recently the outcomes of poverty) as opposed to recognising how the experience of poverty is sustained and reproduced through structural inequalities. Shortly before this thesis was submitted, the SMC (2018) published their new measure of poverty for the UK proposing a broader understanding of poverty which recognises the depth, persistence and lived experience of poverty and the inescapable costs families might be subject to, such as childcare and

housing. The report appears to be a positive move towards recognising the complexity of poverty, however, the proposals are yet to be adopted. Overall, the publication of another report on poverty suggests that the debate about how to conceptualise poverty is far from over.

## **6.2 Discourses of poverty**

Building on the work of Townsend (1979), Levitas (1998) and Lister (2004; 2015), the thesis contributes to a deeper and more complex understanding about discourses of poverty and how moral discourses of work and stigmatising discourses of an underclass reflecting neoliberal regimes of truth have been favoured over discourses of redistribution. Pervasive across the participants' narratives of professional and personal experiences was the complexity of moral discourses and how those in poverty are 'othered' through a process of social distancing, stigmatisation and shame serving to legitimise a neoliberal individualisation of poverty. For example, as discussed in Chapter Four, many participants told small stories about parents, particularly those who were dependent on benefits, which drew on stigmatising discourses, such as 'troubled families' (Levitas, 2012) and the 'chav mum' (Tyler, 2008). At the same time, moral distinctions were made between parents who worked and those who did not work, with the former more likely to be constructed as 'deserving' and the latter as 'undeserving'. Early Years Practitioners contested the discourse of 'work pays' and empathised with working families experiencing in-work poverty, highlighting issues of limited job opportunities, low pay, high childcare costs, housing costs and poor working conditions. Issues for working mothers on low incomes to a large extent reflected those of Early Years Practitioners (low pay, high childcare work and precarious work) illustrating the similarities between the Early Years Practitioners and the families they are supporting. These small stories serve to illuminate the disconnect between the government discourse around 'work always pays' and the experience of large numbers of families experiencing in-work poverty (as discussed by McGuinness, 2018).

New discourses relating to the 'curve ball' (unexpected event) were reflected in Early Years Practitioners' personal and professional stories of poverty. On one level, small stories about the 'curve ball', challenged discourses of 'work pays' and 'underclass', demonstrating how poverty can happen to anyone, for example, the small story of the family and the baby with the serious illness (discussed in Chapter Five). However, at a deeper level they demonstrated complex intersections with class, gender and migration.



For example, in contrast to stigmatising discourses of the ‘chav mum’, fathers were positioned within normative middle-class discourses, such as that of the ‘good father’, thus suggesting that fathers were perhaps judged more favourably than mothers.

Overall, although the findings are based on a small population of Early Years Practitioners within a particular context in the UK, they contribute to the limited literature about Early Years Practitioners and their understanding of poverty in early childhood. The complexity of the discourses reflect the dynamic and complicated nature of poverty. To a certain extent the findings of this study support those of Simpson (2013), in that Early Years Practitioners’ narratives were morally charged and reflected a neoliberal regime of truth which served to individualise poverty. However, in contrast to Simpson’s (2013) study, the Early Years Practitioners drew upon broader, contradictory and more nuanced discourses highlighting the complex intersections between work, gender, social class and motherhood (and fatherhood) and how those in poverty are ‘othered’ through a process of stigmatisation and shame. This suggests that generalised accounts of discourses of poverty are insufficient at capturing the complexity of the discourses revealed by the Early Years Practitioners in this study.

### **6.3 Personal and professional and understandings of poverty**

The attention to the personal and professional has afforded a greater understanding about the tensions and paradoxes between how Early Years Practitioners have been positioned and how they position families living in poverty. Paradoxically, Early Years Practitioners are part of a government strategy to alleviate poverty in early childhood, whilst at the same time, part of a workforce which is highly gendered and to a large extent characterised by low pay, poor working conditions and low status (as discussed by Payler and Locke, 2013; McGillivray, 2008; Miller, 2008; Osgood, 2006a; 2006b). Early Years Practitioners contested a discourse of ‘work pays’, highlighting issues of low pay, high childcare costs, precarious work and financial restraint in relation to their own lives. However, they positioned themselves within neoliberal and normative middle-class discourses, (such as taking individual responsibility and ‘being the right kind of [middle class] self’ as discussed by Gillies, 2005, p. 837). As discussed in Chapter Four, Foucault’s (1975[1979]) concept of ‘surveillance’ is highly relevant to understanding the role of the Early Years Practitioner and the tensions experienced between ‘checking up’ on parents whilst at the same time expecting parents to open up about their lives. Small stories revealed how dual roles of surveillance and support

created barriers for both Early Years Practitioners and parents, with the expectation that parents will be open and trusting whilst at the same time being subject to scrutiny. Paradoxically, as discussed in Chapter One, Moss's (2006) discourse of the 'technician' suggests that Early Years Practitioners are themselves subject to surveillance, for example, through Ofsted inspections.

A further paradox relates to understandings of poverty in other places resulted in poverty being not recognised in the local context. Florence's experience of poverty in Australia illuminated the absolute poverty of Aboriginal mothers living in a refuge and how poverty intersects with race and place. However, at the same time, she found it difficult to recognise poverty in the context of her work with children within the south-east of England. As discussed by Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) comparisons of poverty in the UK with very different contexts in other countries often associate poverty with being 'elsewhere'.

Participants' narratives highlighted the emotional experience of poverty, linked to the process of shaming and stigmatisation which to some extent was reminiscent of work of Chase and Walker (2012). This was particularly evident in personal accounts of poverty, such as Audrey, who highlighted how the emotional experience of poverty linked to the process of shaming and the challenges of everyday survival (as discussed by Lister, 2015). These accounts served to challenge stigmatising discourses, such as those of an underclass, however, they were also cognisant of the importance of recognising the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, as well as objective and subjective experiences. Although paradoxes and tensions were strongly evidenced in the narratives of the Early Years Practitioners this is not something which has been recognised or addressed within government policy. Early Years Practitioners have been positioned as alleviators of poverty, however, there is little recognition of the affective and the tensions between their professional and personal lives and how this impacts on their work with children and families. This suggests that simplistic explanations are insufficient at explaining how Early Years Practitioners understand poverty in early childhood. Although outside the scope of this study, further research might include how individual roles or particular experiences might shape Early Years Practitioners' understandings of poverty.

#### **6.4 Methodological contribution**

Methodologically, the thesis contributes to a body of literature on the value of: the attention to small stories; narrative approaches as a way of understanding the intersection between the personal and professional and discourse; and the use of individual and group methods to understand how narratives are co-constructed. The use of ‘small stories’, drawing on the work of Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008, p. 381), provided a way of exploring how Early Years Practitioners ‘do’ narrative, as well as, capturing ‘ongoing events, future and hypothetical events’. A small story approach enabled the bridging between the discourses that Early Years Practitioners draw on in their understanding of poverty, as well as exploring their professional and personal lives. For example, a small story approach enabled an exploration of the complex ways within which Early Years Practitioners position themselves and others in regard to dominant discourses of poverty and how those in poverty are shamed and stigmatised through a process of ‘othering’.

The use of Buitelaar’s (2006) I-positions afforded the exploration of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ from multiple positions, for example, how they speak from the professional (such as their professional role) and personal lives (for example, as a mother) and how this intersects with understandings of poverty. The use of I-positions facilitated an exploration of how Early Years Practitioners were able to shift between different positions telling stories about the past, future and present, as well as how these might intersect with categories of diversity, such as gender, social class and race. However, challenging the use of such an approach, Chadwick (2017) points out that I-positions are ‘slippery, context-dependent and heterogeneous’, therefore, as I experienced in my own analysis, deciding which I-position a participant might be speaking from and who they might be speaking to is not always apparent. Although outside the scope of this study, further research which includes participants in the analysis of their I-positions might be a useful way to develop this approach.

The use of multiple methods, both individual interviews and focus group interviews provided an in-depth exploration of Early Years Practitioners’ narratives of poverty in terms of how these are co-constructed within individual and group contexts. The purpose of the focus group was to explore how different settings constructed narratives of poverty and how these drew on dominant discourses. The purpose of the individual interview was to explore how individual Early Years Practitioners drew on their

professional and personal experiences to inform their understandings of poverty. However, in the analysis, it was evident that there was an overlap between the function of focus groups and individual interviews, and that to a large extent both contributed to understandings of how narratives of poverty were shaped by dominant discourses and the personal and the professional. For example, some Early Years Practitioners shared very similar small stories about their personal experiences of poverty within both their focus group and individual interviews. Although outside the scope of this study, there is more to explore in terms of how understandings of poverty are constructed, negotiated and contested within both individual interviews and focus group interviews.

### **6.5 Working with positionality and a reflexive approach**

Andrews (2014, p. 8) points out ‘the construction of the self and other is ongoing’, therefore, throughout the course of the doctorate I have reflected on how my understandings of poverty in early childhood have changed. Much of my reflection has taken place within discussion with others, such as the many conversations I have had with my supervisors. Shortly into the doctorate I started to record my supervisory tutorials and would listen to these afterwards. This process allowed me to ‘step back’ and reflect on the construction of my own narrative. Often, I was surprised by the alternative insights this gave me which were different to what I had experienced during the tutorial and was particularly helpful in generating new thoughts and ideas. More informally, discussions with friends and colleagues have also been part of a reflexive approach. During the course of the doctorate, many people have asked me about what I was researching and why. Without fail, nearly everyone who engaged me in conversation about my thesis had an ‘opinion’ about poverty. On reflection, I have become more aware of my differences to others (particularly relating to my early childhood and social background) and how this shaped my own and others’ understanding of poverty. Although outside the scope of this study, there is perhaps more to be gained from further research about our childhood experiences and how this might shape our attitudes as professionals in later life. Through the doctoral process I have learnt the importance of listening and gently challenging as opposed to dismissing others views as simply ‘wrong’ and shutting down the conversation about poverty.

Sometimes reflexivity came through unexpected routes, such as film and novels. This was fuelled by my fascination with story-telling and love of reading. One of my supervisors advised me to ‘keep an open mind’ during my thesis, to thoughts and ideas

– even if they came from ‘non-academic’ places – and to keep a note of these. One of the most powerful examples was going to see ‘I, Daniel Blake’ (2016), a drama film directed by Ken Loach about a widowed carpenter living in the north-east of England who becomes reliant on welfare following a heart attack which leaves him unable to work. Although a work of fiction, the film powerfully communicated the shame, stigma and particularly the affective nature of poverty – I remember sitting at the end of the film watching the final credits with tears rolling down my face. I was deeply aware of how ‘curve balls’ could quickly unravel the life of someone who at first might seem ‘financially stable’.

Overall, the thesis has given me a deeper understanding of poverty in the UK in relation to early childhood, particularly relating to the power and pervasiveness of stigmatising dominant discourses, such as that of an underclass. Shortly before I completed the thesis a report by Davis et al. (2018, p. 3) was published suggesting that families on low incomes were finding it increasingly difficult to meet basic needs. I am also aware of the increasing visibility of poverty in my own local area, for example, how food banks have become an accepted part of everyday life and the increasing numbers of homeless people living on the streets or camping in the nearby countryside. In terms of my professional role as a senior lecture in a university, the research has informed my practice in different ways. In particular, it has given me a greater insight into the issues faced by many of the students who are currently working within the early years sector and the challenges they face with working with families in poverty. In addition, it has made me reflect on how we address issues of poverty within our Early Childhood courses and the importance of giving Early Years Practitioners a ‘space’ where they can be reflexive and be challenged on issues of poverty.

## **6.6 Recommendations: Training and educational opportunities for Early Years Practitioners**

Drawing on Davies et al.’s (2005, p. 344) concept of ‘chiasma’, Early Years Practitioners are a ‘possible locus’ for new discourses to emerge. Although there was limited engagement with a counter discourse of redistribution in terms of how wealth might be more fairly redistributed, inequalities relating to low wages, high childcare costs, housing expenses were contested, particularly in relation to working mothers. To a lesser extent, inequalities were contested in terms of parents who were not working and living on benefits. However, on the rare occasion where this was the case, such as

Audrey's account, there were examples of Ball's (2015) concept of 'parrhesia' – the fearless telling of truth in everyday lives, revealing the personal shame, emotion and stigmatisation of living in poverty. Her account provided a strong counter-narrative highlighting how the poor are shamed and stigmatised and how the lived experience of stigma, shame and the affective, is unrecognised in dominant discourses and government policy. It is perhaps such narratives that provide an opportunity for Early Years Practitioners to emerge as 'new agents' (drawing on Osgood, 2006b), to contest, challenge and change existing neoliberal discourses of poverty.

Osgood's (2006a; 2006b) discourse of the 'new agent', suggests that it is possible for Early Years Practitioners to 'oppose' and transform policy through critical reflection on the social and political context within which they are positioned and how they can be re-positioned. Giving Early Years Practitioners 'spaces' where they can critically reflect on their professional and personal lives and how these might 'shape' and 'be shaped' by dominant discourses may create opportunities for them to work as 'new agents', such as effecting changes in how poverty in early childhood is understood and enabling new alternative discourses of poverty. Arguably, universities (training Early Years Practitioners) and ECEC providers need to be looking at other ways they can engage with Early Years Practitioners to find 'spaces' for development and training. To transform understandings requires changes in how both Early Years Practitioners and those in poverty are positioned within policy and professional discourse. Lister (2015, p. 154) suggests that a way of refusing the shame of poverty is to challenge 'othering' through engagement with a counter discourse of human rights-based on recognition and respect, for example, by listening to the voice of people in poverty and recognising that the knowledge they bring is invaluable. In the field of social work, families who have experienced poverty have been included in the development of a training programme for social workers on working with families in poverty (Gupta, 2015). Such practices could be employed in the training and development of Early Years Practitioners, looking at how changes can be made to the delivery of existing courses (such as foundation degrees in Early Childhood and Early Years Teacher Status) as well as, looking at alternative ways of engagement (such as working with networks of Early Years Practitioners). As Lister (2015) suggests, such practice, may lead to policies about poverty which are 'shame-proofed', based on listening and respect.

Although the current government says it is committed to investing and valuing Early Years Practitioners (DfE, 2017b), attempts to professionalise the early years sector have met with limited success. Despite professional routes, such as foundation degrees and Early Years Teacher Status (DfE, 2017b), most Early Years Practitioners remain qualified to a low level (DfE, 2017b). Staff turnover within the sector continues to be high, largely due to issues of low pay, lack of progression and access to affordable and accessible training (NDNA, 2016). The complexity of the narratives I have collected suggests that people need a space to reflect on the ways in which they and others are positioned within discourses of poverty in relation to their lived experiences. If there is any possibility for Early Years Practitioners to become ‘new agents’, then this is something that professional training and continued professional development need to address.

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**Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Methodological approach to the literature review

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## **Appendix 1 – Methodological approach to the literature review**

Sharland (2012) suggests that there needs to be a balance between ensuring that what is reviewed is carried out with regard to acceptable epistemic norms (such as transparency, analysis of the quality of the studies), and that this should be balanced with the need to make the review fit for purpose, that is, recognising how the purpose and available literature in the area may influence the choice of method. Finfgeld-Connett and Johnson (2012) propose that in certain circumstances, particularly where there is not an established body of literature or where a number of terms are available to describe similar concepts, the best method to employ is a ‘berry picking’ approach. As there appeared to be very little research about Early Years Practitioners’ understandings of poverty in early childhood this was an appropriate approach to take. A ‘berry picking’ approach allows the researcher to explore fully the aims of the review and the interrelationships between the different concepts and notions without being subject to overly restrictive inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finfgeld-Connett and Johnson (2012) use the metaphor of ‘berry picking’ to describe how a literature search can be similar to searching for patches of ripe fruit and when exhausting one area going off to look for another. For example, on several occasions I found a relevant source and by looking at citations or searching for similar terms found other relevant sources.

A limitation of a ‘berry picking’ approach, is that is not always possible to map the process from the outset, neither is it easily reconstructed at the conclusion (Finfgeld-Connett and Johnson, 2012). To address this limitation, I have attempted to promote transparency in how the data was collected. The search strategy consisted of four stages. In stage 1, I revisited relevant studies and articles which I had used in previous assignments relating to my doctoral studies. These were analysed in terms of critical concepts, for example, poverty, narrative, I-positions and discourse. The analysis informed both my understanding of how concepts interrelated, for example, discourse and poverty. In stage 2, key author names from stage 1 were used to search for further related studies to my research questions. Two academic online search engines, SCOPUS and Web of Knowledge (WoK) were used, chosen for their wide range of high impact and peer reviewed social science papers. In Stage 3, key terms (and other similar terms) relating to my research questions were used to search for further sources. To ensure the search was up to date and relevant, restrictions were applied relating to time, language and country. Only one study, Simpson’s (2013) study on ‘Remediating child poverty via preschool: exploring practitioners’ perspectives in England’ was

found which directly related to my area of interest. In stage 4, a search for relevant grey literature, such as government documents and policies and newspaper articles was undertaken using generic search engines (such as Google and Google Scholar) and government websites (such as Gov.UK and the Office of National Statistics). These were useful in locating the latest policy documents and news stories relating to poverty in early childhood. Although I have presented the research process as four linear stages, in practice it was more flexible, for example, on more than one occasion, friends or colleagues would recommend a book or an article, often these proved to be very helpful in shaping my thinking about the thesis, for example, Osgood's (2010) article about narratives encouraged me to think about taking a narrative approach for my study.

## Appendix 2 – Article

# Tories have redefined child poverty as not just about having no money

New definition will have moral, judgmental dimension, as campaigners say further stigmatising single parent families will do nothing to tackle the issue



Children playing in the streets in Brierfield in Lancashire, where nearly 35% of children live in poverty and just over 50% are classed as poor, according to the End Child Poverty Campaign. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

Is poverty caused by not having any money, or is it the result of lifestyle choices like “unstable relationships” and “debt and addiction”? This has been the ideological line dividing the debate on child poverty for the last decade; the Conservative government has finally succeeded in redefining poverty as no longer simply about finances, but about something fuzzier and less easy to measure.

Gentleman, A. (2015) The Guardian (online) <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/jul/01/tories-redefined-child-poverty-no-longer-finances> (accessed 4.8.15)

### **Appendix 3 – Indicative focus group question guide**

#### **Focus group questions**

##### **Introduction:**

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in the focus group. I want to know what you think about child poverty in England and how this relates to the practice within your setting.

- Please take a minute or two to look at the information sheet [I will talk through the information sheet] and consent form.
- I will be recording the session [check everyone is happy with this].
- I would be grateful at the end if you could fill out a form with a few background details about who is taking part in the group and have a box for you to put these into after the session.

##### **Main questions:**

1. What do you think causes child poverty? Hand out newspaper headlines about ‘redefining poverty’ and ‘welfare cuts’.

Possible Supplementary questions:

- a. What is child poverty?
- b. What does it mean to be a poor child in England?
- c. How do families end up in poverty?
- d. What kinds of families end up in poverty?

2. What does child poverty mean in this setting?

Possible Supplementary questions:

- a) How does the setting support children in poverty?
- b) What are the challenges of supporting children and families in poverty?
- c) Do you think it’s possible to train people to support families in poverty? What sort of training is needed?

Thank you very much for taking part in the focus group. There might have been things you haven’t had a chance to say or don’t want to say in front of other people. If this is the case then please fill out a card and post it in the ‘secret box’, you don’t have to write your name on the card. The things you say will included as part of the information for the focus group.

#### **Appendix 4 – Indicative individual interview question guide**

Thank you very much for taking part in the focus group. As we discussed a few weeks ago the focus group was about finding out what the group understood about child poverty and how this connected with the work you all do at the setting. Today I'm interested in finding about what you understand about child poverty and how this may or may not be connected to other parts of your life. I've got a few general questions to ask you. Is there anything you wanted to ask or check before we start? [Go through information sheet and check consent sheet. Ask if the participant is happy for the interview to be recorded].

So I want to start by getting to know a bit about your life experience and professional work.

1. Let's start with a few factual questions.
  - Job title
  - How long have you worked here?
2. Tell me about how you came to work with young children?
  - How did you become a [job title]?
3. How did you first become aware of poverty?
4. How do you think attitudes to poverty get formed?
5. In the FG the group ....
6. What does child poverty mean to you in connection with your professional role?
7. I am interested in the personal and the professional and how these things do or don't connect with each other. How do you think other parts of your life shape what you do professionally? How does this connect with your understanding of child poverty?

Thank you for taking part is there anything else you would like to add?



## Appendix 5 – Information sheet



University of Sussex

### INFORMATION SHEET

**Title of study: Early Years Practitioners' perspectives of child poverty in England**

**Name of researcher: Sandra Lyndon**

*I would like to invite you to take part in my study about 'Early Years Practitioners' perspectives of child poverty in England'. Before you decide whether or not to take part please read the information below, which will explain why the study is being done and what it will involve.*

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of the study is to explore Early Years Practitioners' perspectives of child poverty within early years settings in England. The study will contribute to the thesis for my Doctorate of Education at the University of Sussex. You will be invited to take part in a focus group, an individual interview and final discussion group. It is anticipated that the focus group and interview will take place before Christmas 2015 and the final discussion group will take place early next year. The groups and individual interview will be arranged at times which are convenient for you.

#### **Why have I been invited to participate?**

You have been chosen to take part in the study because you work with children under the age of 5 years in a preschool setting.

#### ***Do I have to take part?***

*It is up to you to decide whether or not you take part in the study. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.*

#### **What will happen to me if I decide to take part?**

If you decide to take part you will be invited to:

- Be part of a focus group with other Early Years Practitioners from your setting. The focus group will be approximately 60 minutes.
- Be interviewed individually by Sandra Lyndon. The interview will be approximately between 60 to 90 minutes.
- Be part of a final discussion group to discuss the themes coming out of the study as a whole. The final discussion group will be approximately 60 minutes.
- Give your permission for the interview, focus group and final discussion to be audio taped.

#### ***Can I withdraw from the study?***

*If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence and without giving a reason. However, for practical reasons it*

*will not be possible to withdraw your data from the focus group and discussion group after they have taken place. A transcript of your interview will be given to you after it has been transcribed so you can check for accuracy.*

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

The benefits of taking part in the study include sharing perspectives of Early Years Practitioners' views on child poverty with others from your setting and reflecting on issues related to child poverty.

**Will my information in this study be kept confidential?**

- All the information you provide in the interview and group discussions will be kept strictly confidential by the researcher (subject to legal limitations) and stored electronically on a password protected computer.
- Maintaining confidentiality for group discussions is more challenging as there is more than one person taking part. Everyone taking part in a group discussion be asked to keep everything discussed within the focus group confidential as far as practicably possible.
- Information will only be viewed by Sandra Lyndon and her supervisors.
- Anonymity will be ensured by not disclosing the names of the individual participants or early years settings.
- Short anonymised quotes from participants may be included in the writing up of the study.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of the study will be used in my thesis for my Doctorate of Education at the University of Sussex. They may also be published in academic journals or presented at conferences.

**Who is organising the study?**

I am conducting the study as a student at the University of Sussex within the Department of Education. This study has been approved by the ethical review process at the University of Sussex.

**What should I do if I want to take part?**

If you would like to take part please contact me via email [s.lyndon@chi.ac.uk](mailto:s.lyndon@chi.ac.uk) or complete and return the consent form provided.

**Contact for further information:**

For further information please contact me via email ([s.lyndon@chi.ac.uk](mailto:s.lyndon@chi.ac.uk)). If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted please contact my supervisor, Louise Gazeley ([l.h.gazeley@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:l.h.gazeley@sussex.ac.uk)).

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

## Appendix 6 – Consent form



### CONSENT FORM

**Title of Study: Early Year Practitioners' perspectives on Child Poverty in England**

**Name of researcher: Sandra Lyndon**

**Please tick the boxes if you agree to give consent to the following:**

I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

I have had the study explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for records. ☐

I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to give provisional consent to the following (please tick as appropriate):

- Take part in a focus group discussion ☐
- Take part in an individual interview with Sandra Lyndon ☐
- Take part in a final discussion to discuss an analysis of the data from all the focus groups and interviews ☐
- Give permission for the focus group, interview and group discussion to be audio taped ☐

I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study without giving a reason at any time. ☐

I understand that the information I provide will be anonymised, kept confidentially and not be released to any third parties as outlined in the Information Sheet. ☐

I understand that the results of the study will be used in Sandra Lyndon's thesis for her Doctorate of Education at the University of Sussex. They may also be published in academic journals or presented at conferences. ☐

+	Name:	
	Signature	Date:

### Appendix 7 – Example of transcription

S: okay okay lovely and what was it about working with children which made you want to ..

Yvonne: Well ..

S: have a change

Yvonne: I mean if I'm honest at the very beginning really it was convenient really I think

S: yer

Yvonne: you know when you've got your own children em you sort of look for careers which will actually fit in their pattern of school holidays

S: yer

Yvonne: but I suppose I was rather surprised I enjoyed it so much

S: yer

Yvonne: em and I did do a bit of volunteering before er I went er I applied for my place at [name of university] to do my PGCE and I was really quite surprised at how I enjoyed it and er um ... but I particularly enjoy nursery education I enjoy that sort of freedom

S: um

Yvonne: and the children can you can let children be you can follow children's interests and therefore they're motivated to learn because they've shown you it's something their interested in right from the very beginning .. I would be much less comfortable teaching in a primary school

## Appendix 8 – Example of a small story and analysis

### Small story – awareness of poverty in Australia

S: Yeah, yeah. Erm – yeah, sorry to interrupt. Erm – yes. So h-how did you first become aware of poverty?

Florence Erm – I think largely the worst- hardest one was when- when I was out in- in Australia with the children with- who were going into the refuge.

S: [Hmm. Yeah]

Florence: Erm – because – yes. I mean, they literally, er, regardless I don't think- I don't think actually they would've had much. But they would, some of them would end up with absolutely nothing.

S: [Yeah]

Florence: Like, the clothes they wore...

S: Yeah]

Florence: Would be what they [inaudible] the refuge.

S: Yeah]

Florence: And that would be it, you know?

S: Gosh. Yeah]

Florence: Erm – yeah. And sometimes the Aboriginal children didn't even have shoes on their feet or any- you know?

S: Hmm. Hmm]

Florence: They just – yeah, have to get away and- and run away and- and wouldn't have anything.

S: [Yeah]

Florence: And then you'd have to – the other people in- who worked at the refuge would help them sort of, erm, save some of the money they got from a-allowances...

S: Hmm]

Florence: That were the...

S: Yeah]

You know, first of all they had to make sure that they were all paid and receiving their entitlement.

S: Hmm

Florence: Pensions they call them in Australia.

S: Hmm. Hmm

Florence: To actually be living, you know, be able to s- live. And then somebody at the refuge would help them sort of manage to budget and save.

S: Hmm

Florence: They were expected to pay some money towards housekeeping at the refuge.

S: Yeah

Florence: But the rest of it they were sort of en-encouraged to sort of put away and so it would be kept in a- in a sort of safe for them.

S: Hmm. Hmm

Florence: That's- that's just a way of them saving.

S: Yeah

Florence: And work out how they could do things. But I mean, that would be – yes, you know, quite- quite a hardship then.

S: Hmm]

Florence: And for them to then get back on their feet...

S: Yeah, yeah

Florence: And get things together to actually possibly move out into a- into somewhere for themselves.

S: Hmm] So that- I mean, that was one thing with poverty.

## **Appendix 9 – Analysis of small story**

### **What is the ‘small story’ in response to?**

This story is told in response to a question I ask Florence about how she first became aware of poverty.

### **Why is she telling this story now? What work is that story doing?**

In this story she talks about how poverty within the refuge was probably the worst. She says that some children going in to the refuge would have nothing [because they had to get/run away], just the clothes they wore and sometimes the Aboriginal children would not even have shoes on their feet. In the refuge they are encouraged to save money from their allowance [benefits] and contribute towards the housekeeping of the refuge. Florence comments on how it was a hard ship for them and difficult to get things together to move out in to their own place.

The story is about ‘absolute’ poverty in a country outside of the UK and the experience of mothers and children.

### **‘I’ positions – the different subject positions from which the story is told [level 1 of Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s (2008) positioning levels]**

Florence speaks from her I-position as a worker in a women’s refuge in Australia.

### **How does this link to dominant discourses of poverty [level 3 of Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s (2008) positioning levels]**

This story links to understandings of absolute poverty, children and mothers without the basics for living e.g. change of clothes, home, money, food.

It also links to the vulnerability of mothers and risk of poverty through relationship breakdown e.g. abusive relationships. So maybe relates to a ‘curve ball’ (poverty is experienced through no fault of the mother and children).

Also reveals intersections with ethnicity and how some ethnic groups might be more vulnerable to poverty than others e.g. Aboriginal peoples.

### **Field notes about how I positioned myself within the narrative (level 2)**

After listening to the interview again and then reading it through I was struck by two things. Firstly, Florence does not make any overt judgements about those in poverty, although she does judge others for not wanting to see or give recognition to those in poverty. Secondly, I’m struck with how her experience of working in Australia shaped her understanding of poverty e.g. the absolute poverty of Aboriginal women and children at the

### Appendix 10 – Example of mapping to research questions

	Over-arching research question: How do Early Years Practitioners understand poverty in early childhood?	Research sub-question: How does the personal and professional shape Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty?	Research sub-question: How do dominant discourses of poverty shape Early Years Practitioners' narratives of poverty in early childhood?
Nicole's Interview	Nicole talks about how poverty in some cases is closely linked to inadequate parenting. Her understanding links to the role of 'surveillance', for example, looking out for signs of poverty. She talks about poverty as something which is individualised [e.g. parental choice and about having a job/or not having a job] but also recognises the structural impacts on poverty [e.g. lack of jobs; increasing gap between rich and poor].	In her role Nicole presents herself as someone who is skilled in noticing the signs of poverty. In relation to her early childhood she has a strong sense of injustice about how children on free school meals were stigmatised at school. She suggests that her views have been formed by her parents; the area she grew up in; and her schooling.	Nicole's understandings of poverty connect with Foucault's ideas of surveillance and how Early Years Practitioners are under constant surveillance from inspections and how they in turn perform a surveillance role on parents (e.g. looking out for signs of inadequate parenting). Her narrative connects to discourses of the underclass, for example, how parents are stigmatised for causing their own poverty. Nicole challenges dominant discourses of poverty through her counter narrative of how poverty is caused by structural inequalities such as lack of jobs, economic crisis and the gap between rich and poor. She provides a counter narrative to the stigmatisation and othering of children on free school meals.



## Appendix 11 – A3 sheet of initial findings for the discussion group

<b>Early Years Practitioners' Narratives of Child Poverty</b> A summary of Preliminary Findings Sandra Lyndon	
<b>Aim and Context</b> The aim of my study was to find out about Early Years Practitioners' (EY Practitioners) understandings of child poverty within early year settings. I spoke to 38 early years practitioners including nursery assistants, nursery nurses, family outreach workers, teachers, family support workers and managers. Everyone who took part in the study was invited to a presentation of what I found and an opportunity to give feedback on my findings.	<b>Parents from Eastern Europe</b> Some people talked about parents from Eastern Europe or other countries who were described as working hard for low wages, juggling child care arrangements and often not aware of what their children were entitled to, e.g. free health care.  <i>'the eastern European families that haven't got that family support as well and they often find it very hard to get ..to access ..you know what they should be getting for their children, for their families'</i>
<b>Poverty is 'more than financial'</b> Many people said poverty is 'more than financial' and some said it was not related to finances at all. Some talked about different types of poverty e.g. linguistic, environmental, time, resources and emotional poverty.  <i>'you know poverty is not just about money it could be about time ... resources'</i>	<b>Work and Benefits</b> Many people talked about families either in work and/or on benefits. Some raised concerns about the tensions for families regarding expensive childcare, low wages and benefits (including the introduction of Universal Credit).  <i>'they're not very well paid jobs they're paying for child care and actually their money they've got at the end of the month is very very little but they're not entitled to get the pupil premium'</i>
<b>Poverty could happen to anyone</b> Some people talked about how poverty could happen to anyone e.g. an unexpected life event, such as, loss of a job or death of a family member.  <i>'It's an accident or a .. being made redundant and lost their jobs because the company they work for has gone under or anything so sometimes there are elements which are out of control of your own'</i>	<b>Parents who 'manage' poverty and those who don't 'manage'</b> In general terms people talked about parents who 'managed' poverty and those who 'don't manage poverty'. Often these ideas were related to how the parents looked after their children or managed their money.  <i>'but what they got is appropriate for the weather always well dressed looks beautiful always very clean .. so they are obviously managing'</i>
<b>Poverty is a choice</b> Some people talked about poverty being a choice, for example, families who prioritised the wrong things, such as, alcohol and drugs.  <i>'as a family would have been earning exactly the same as what the family was with their ..[...] but they prioritised alcohol cigarettes whatever else I guess drugs'</i>	<b>Parenting</b> Some people talked about parents in poverty who were good at parenting and others who struggled.  <i>'because not only are they in poverty but because they don't have any of those parenting skills'</i>
	<b>Mothers and Fathers</b> Although many people talked about mothers and poverty, there were some people who talked about poverty and fathers.  <i>'he was going to be a doctor and everything and he had to drop out to look after the children .. [...] he used the 2 year funding'</i>
	<b>Visibility and invisibility</b> Some people talked about how poverty was 'hidden' and that parents attempted to conceal or hide poverty because of stigma, shame and embarrassment.  <i>'And she was so embarrassed that she didn't want me to come round to the- where she lived'</i>
	<b>Tensions between work and being a parent</b> Some people talked about the tensions for parents who work and care for their children.  <i>'some of the children who are in here eight to six every week and then in...in through the holiday time all day as well....their parents might be very affluent but that is a form or poverty'</i>
	<b>Safeguarding and support</b> Some people talked about their responsibility for safeguarding children and how parents viewed them as an 'authority' figure. This role sometimes appeared to be in tension with building a trusting relationship with parents.  <i>'we're an authority they [parents] know we link to lots and lots of other authority figures we link to lots of other agencies they know that'</i>
	<b>Eligibility criteria</b> A few people talked about the difficulties of supporting families who did not meet eligibility criteria for support and/or services.  <i>'And that goes back to the threshold [...] some of those services that would be ideal for some of those families [...] would be great but they don't tick enough boxes to be able to access them'</i>
For further information please contact Sandra Lyndon	

**Appendix 12 – Editing of direct quotes**

The following symbols are used in the editing of participants' small stories in Chapters

Four and Five:

(..) = Indicates a small pause

(...) = Indicates a longer pause

[...] = where one word or more has been omitted from the transcript.

S = signifies when the interviewer is talking